

## LIMITATIONS TO INCLUSIVE UNIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF WHITE AND ABORIGINAL WOMEN FOREST WORKERS IN THE NORTHERN PRAIRIES

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### ABSTRACT

Several authors have argued that broadening the traditional understandings of union solidarity is necessary for union renewal. Concerns specific to workers from marginalized groups have been shown to challenge traditional understandings of union collectivity. This paper draws on interviews with white and Aboriginal women forest processing workers to argue that interrogating marginalized workers' negative representations of their unions can provide insights that will help to broaden traditional understandings of union solidarity. I use thematic analysis followed by critical discourse analysis to examine women workers' negative talk about unions. I present examples of how women's negative representations of their unions can be understood as different forms of collectivism when examined in the context of their lived experiences of work and unionism. Some white and Aboriginal women's representations of their unions wove individualistic anti-union statements together with their previous experiences of work highlighting the inequality between unionized and non-unionized workers in the community. The talk of other Aboriginal women critiqued the union for not representing them while demonstrating a sense of collectivity with other Aboriginal workers. By exploring linkages between women's negative representations of unions and their work experiences, unions can better understand the negative union sentiment of marginalized workers and use this to create more inclusive forms of solidarity.

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### INTRODUCTION

One explanation for the declining support for unionization has been the rise of neo-liberalism and an associated socio-cultural shift from collective to individualistic orientations towards work (Valkenburg and Zoll, 1995; Schenk, 2004). From this perspective, workers have increasingly come to view work as an individual project of self-fulfillment, defined their work interests in terms of the self, and come to favour individual forms of resistance such as quitting over collective ones such as going on strike

(Kuhn, 2006; Smith, 2006). The claim that people are becoming more individualistic and, as a result, have negative attitudes towards unions has also been associated with greater workforce diversity. There is, however, little empirical evidence to support this link between greater individualism and the recognition of difference among workers. Yet, when the argument of individualism is articulated, it often hinges on claims that the collectivism of the past was strengthened by social and cultural group similarity outside of the workplace. For example, Hyman states that “unions in the past were built in the main on pre-existing solidarities...” and that “...collective experience at work was complemented by domestic life in a nearby community with shared recreational, cultural and sometimes religious pursuits.”(2002; 7) Similarly, Valkenburg and Zoll (1995) suggest that

... unions can no longer have recourse to previously constituted collectivities; they must reckon with individuals who ask to be respected in their identity and individuality. Collectivity is no longer given by tradition or homogeneity of interest, but it can be created temporarily by conscious discourses on specific themes. (Valkenburg and Zoll 1995; 124)

What underwrites these statements is the belief that greater social and cultural heterogeneity in the workforce has acted in combination with a move towards individual employment relationships in the workplace to render collectivity more difficult to achieve.

Survey research has only found weak evidence that the ideological orientations towards unions of workers from historically marginalized groups are any different from those of other workers. In the case that perceptions have differed, moreover, workers from marginalized groups have been found to have a greater propensity toward unionism (Barling et al. 1992; Marsden 1997; Yates 2005). Workers from marginalized groups are likely to have distinct experiences and understandings that shape their engagement with, and perceptions of unions (Levesque et al. 2005). This suggests that workers from marginalized groups might have a weaker identification, not with collective action per se, but rather with *traditional* notions of unionism rooted in the assumption of standard, full-time, long term employment in workplaces that are predominantly white and male (Hansen 2004; Levesque et al. 2005). Despite the suggestion that groups that have been historically marginalized within unions subscribe to different forms of union collectivity, these studies have fallen short on providing any understanding of what these forms entail or for *why* marginalized groups may have different perspectives towards traditional union collectivity.

In order to better understand the perceptions of marginalized workers towards unions in relation to values of individualism or collectivism, this paper examines the talk of white and Aboriginal women working in white- and male-

dominated unionized forest processing mills of a multinational forest company (MNFC). I use the term white to describe the non-Aboriginal women interviewed since none were women of colour and since all self identified as being of Canadian or European ancestry. I use the term Aboriginal to collectively denote people of Métis or First Nations ancestry regardless of whether they were Status Indians as defined by Canada's Indian Act. While the term Aboriginal obscures differences among different Nations and individuals, in the context of this study, women who were visibly Aboriginal were singled out by their co-workers and employers who saw them as different.

My results show that the negative comments about unions emanating from workers who belong to marginalized groups should not be written off prematurely as a neo-liberal shift in values away from union collectivism. Instead, negative comments about unions from marginalized groups might in fact reference forms of collectivity that differ from those of their unions. When examined in the context of women's lives, statements that may initially appear to be irreconcilable with traditional notions of unionism may instead be understood as forms of collectivity that need to be developed in order to attain more inclusive and deep forms of solidarity.

## CONTEXT

My analysis of forest processing mills was situated in communities that had a tradition of forest mill work dating back to the early 1900s. Work in the forest processing mills in Canada has often formed the basis of strong working class identities that valued collectivity, masculinity and whiteness (Dunk 1994). Consequently, while Aboriginal people comprised approximately 30% of the population of each of the communities in 2001, they were under represented in forest processing work<sup>i</sup>. Aboriginal men were historically excluded from work in the region's larger forest processing mills, and instead encouraged to work in woods based activities such as forest fire fighting or logging (Teskey and Smyth 1975; Baron 1997; Quiring 2004). Women were particularly disadvantaged, having been historically excluded from all forms of forestry work except for clerical work. These trends continued into the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and were evident in the profile of the MNFC's regional workforce. In 2003, the company's regional workforce was comprised of only 15.9% women, and 12.3% Aboriginal people. Aboriginal women were under-represented in the firm to a greater extent than either Aboriginal men or white women, comprising only 2.5% of all of the workers in the firm's regional operations. In addition, within the MNFC, Aboriginal workers were over-represented in a small sawmill that had been open for five years that was co-owned between the MNFC and three First Nations, the MNFC holding the balance of shares.

## **METHODS**

I use critical discourse analysis to examine the experiences and values underpinning the negative union sentiment of women workers. Critical discourse analysis strives to critically examine language and its relationship to power associated with social structures (Wodak 2001). This relationship sees language as both reflecting and helping to create social structures and inequalities. Hence, the context of an individual's talk is essential to understanding its underlying assumptions and how it relates to power relations. I examined women's talk about unions not as isolated statements, but as embedded in the contexts of their experiences of work both within and outside of forest processing mills.

My examination of white and Aboriginal women worker's representations of their unions drew on semi-structured interviews with 23 white and Aboriginal women working as clerical workers or labourers across four mills. These interviews represented a subset of a larger set of 40 interviews with women working in forest processing and were selected because they represented the unionized women working in subsidiaries of one MNFC. Ten of the women interviewed self-identified as being of Aboriginal ancestry. I analyzed interviews with women workers using thematic analysis followed by critical discourse analysis. Interviews were first coded to identify women's representations of their unions. Texts representing the themes were then analyzed using critical discourse analysis focusing on meanings related to representations of identity and to ideological representations of the union following from Fairclough (1992; 2003).

## **RESULTS**

In response to the question "Do you feel that being unionized affects working conditions for you?", responses were evenly split (11:11) between statements that the union had either a negative or no difference on working conditions, and statements that the union had a positive impact on working conditions. Women with less seniority or who identified as Aboriginal were more likely to represent the union negatively while women who had higher seniority or were white were more likely to represent the union positively. This snapshot of union affection, however, obscures the complexity of white and Aboriginal women's representations of their unions in the wake of industry change. Thematic analysis resulted in the emergence of three prominent representations of unions: anti-union perspectives drawing on individualistic anti-unionism; critical perspectives of the union that expressed collective lack of representation; and pro-union perspectives based in both values of solidarity and in worker's perceptions that the union effectively improves their work

conditions. In this paper I focus specifically on the negative perspectives that women had towards their unions and conduct a more detailed analysis of some of the negative talk about unions within the two themes.

*Individualistic anti-unionism*

Workers often have expectations of both the economic order and their employer (Penney 2004). These expectations develop over time as workers come to see particular work conditions and pay as normal and morally right. Anti-union perspectives drawing on individualistic anti-union rhetoric were expressed by several women who had less than five years seniority and who had previous work experiences in low-wage, competitive sectors (including both white and Aboriginal women). Women's individualistic expressions of anti-unionism were often framed by the discrepancy between their expectations of work developed from years of working in these workplaces and their work conditions and pay at the mill. Although anti-union talk drew on popularized anti-union statements linked to individualistic ideology, it also contained an element of collectivism: women's expressions of guilt associated with their knowledge of the discrepancy between jobs at the mill and other jobs in their communities.

In the sawmill and pulp mill that had each been open for over 20 years, the first women were hired for non-clerical positions in the mid 1980s and substantial numbers of women only began to be hired in the mid to late 1990s. As a result, the average number years of seniority for women were approximately half the average number of years of seniority for men and the median number of years that the women interviewed had been employed was five years and the average age of the interviewees was 42. The majority of the women had entered mill work after working other jobs in their communities, most of which consisted of low-paid service sector employment or seasonal work in the primary sector. Several women's descriptions of being hired on at the mill reflected their perceptions of the tremendous change in working conditions and income they experienced moving from more flexible and low paid employment to highly paid stable employment at the mill.

*... I remember getting hired at [the company] and saying to people that I feel like I've won the lottery, you know. You know for me, someone with a grade 12 and some secondary education, not very much, yeah it's like winning a lottery. It was probably triple, than what I was living on.*

In this woman's comparison between her work at Wal-mart and her job at the mill she used the imagery of winning the lottery to suggest that getting a job at the mill was something that she believed to be against the balance of

probabilities. By stating “You know for me, someone with a grade 12 and some secondary education,” she positioned herself as someone who would not or should not obtain a mill job. This reflected an underlying belief that the labour market allocates decent paying jobs to people who, unlike her, have education and hence qualifications. The feeling of not deserving the decent working conditions and wages such as those offered at the mills was repeated by many of the women. In particular, four of the women stated that they felt that they were over paid.

This discrepancy between women’s expectations of the workplace and their experiences at the mills helped to shape women’s representations of their union.

Cree/Dene woman: ... *Well I came from, like I mean my previous job, there was no union. I mean basically you did the work, you know... ... like it got to the point where like, just a simple little thing that could be fixed it started getting sticky, it's like well it's not my job, that's the millwright's job you know ... and any grievances I mean, I found the grievances just to be like well coming from the store or whatever, and then all of a sudden going into the mill where there's a union, I found that a lot of times they, people would bitch over just the simplest little things.*

When asked if being in a union impacted her work conditions, this woman, who had previously worked in a print shop for one third of the wage that she received at the mill, did not state that the union provided her with voice or improved her work conditions, but rather that the union allowed workers to ‘bitch over just the simplest little things.’ In the context of this woman’s work life, her comment can also be understood as a statement that highlights the inequality of work conditions in the community between those who have unionized jobs and those who do not.

The relationship between knowledge of work outside the mill and individualistic anti-union statements was demonstrated particularly well by one woman who had worked as a cook in a logging camp, as a gas station attendant and as a retail salesperson before coming to work at the mill where she had worked for three years.

Interviewer: *Do you feel that being unionized affects your working conditions?*

White woman: *Yes. You can go to work and you can do nothing or you can work all day, it doesn't matter, you still get paid ... this is*

*my first union job I've taken and I'm still not comfortable with it because there are people that don't do anything. Really. They show up for their job and sit in a chair and push a few buttons and that's it so, (pause) and the union protects them. And I can see where the union was really good years ago but (pause) like we get really good benefits, it's a safe working environment but I think they've pushed it too far... .. Honestly we do, we make enough money. It's crazy, it is. It's nice to get the pay check but (pause). When I first started I felt guilty taking this much money for this. So far I, some days I get really frustrated and I think well I'm not doing this if nobody else is, but I can't do that because that's my job (pause) and if they can go home at the end of the day and live with themselves like that well then.*

In her response, the woman positioned herself as a recent entrant into the union environment who continued to be an outsider by using 'they' to denote unionized workers, and by stating that it is her first unionized job. She professed to reveal the truth about how things worked within the mill using the words 'really' and 'honestly'. Her account drew on two popularized anti-union arguments: that the union protects lazy workers and that the union makes wages 'too high.' At first glance, these arguments support an individualistic value frame that prioritizes hard work, and reward for individual effort. The woman implies that lazy workers are immoral while making her argument that the union protects lazy workers, stating 'if they can go home at the end of the day and live with themselves like that well then'. Yet, if understood in the context of her experience as an outsider to unionized work, her statement can be understood as one that highlights the inequality in the fact that 'lazy' workers in the mill are able to collect a check that is much higher than that of hard workers such as herself, who until recently worked outside of the mill. The woman's connection with non-unionized workers is further developed in her second argument that unions make the wages too high, where she states "I think they've pushed it too far" indicating that she finds the high wages resulting from unionization so unwarranted that they are unsettling.

Although the woman presented the high wages as out of line with the skill required to do the work, reflecting an underlying belief that wages should reflect training and education, she also presented working conditions at the mill as exceptional stating 'It is something you have to see to believe.' The woman followed this presentation of the wages and benefits as outside of the ordinary with a statement that she felt guilty receiving such a high wage. Although the woman's statement of guilt could be read as sympathy for the employer, her guilt can also be read as guilt resulting from her knowledge that the wages and

working conditions of people working outside of the mill were much lower. The concept of survivor guilt was further indicated by comments of other women workers. While commenting on what she thought of unions, another woman stated:

White woman:     ... it [the union] is good and it's bad.

Interviewer:     How is it bad?

White woman:     Lots of workers out there don't have what we have so...

This woman identified union workers as having better work conditions than other workers as something that was bad about the union – implying that she did not think that it was right for their work conditions be so much different. Survivor guilt as a form of connection to non-unionized workers in fact demonstrates a broader understanding of social good and collectivity than that that was practiced by her union local.

#### *Not Being Represented*

Perceptions of a specific union's ability to effectively improve one's work life have been linked to workers' commitment and loyalty towards their unions and to worker's attitudes towards unions in general (Barling et al. 1992). Workers from marginalized groups may be more likely to communicate dissatisfaction with the union's effectiveness if their interests are not addressed as a result of discrimination or exclusion within the workplace and the union. Although negative talk related to perceptions of not being represented by their union was expressed by both Aboriginal and white women, it was most pronounced amongst Aboriginal women. Several Aboriginal women expressed negative perceptions of their union from a collective stance that was rooted in dissatisfaction with their union's ability to improve their work conditions.

While Aboriginal women had a higher likelihood of making negative statements about their union than white women, they also had experienced a higher degree of systemic and direct discrimination. In comparison to white women, Aboriginal women were more likely to report experiences of discrimination and harassment from both managers and co-workers in the workplace (Table 1). Over the course of the interviews, Aboriginal women also told more personal narratives of negative experiences with their union and fewer personal narratives that were positive in relation to their experiences with the union than white women.

Systemic discrimination also influenced Aboriginal women's experiences of work. Aboriginal women within the MNFC were over-represented in a mill



that was co-owned by First Nations and the company. Since this mill was smaller in size than the other mills owing to the limited capital of the First Nations, the company argued that it was less profitable and that it required a new flow to work system for it to remain viable. The implementation of the work system was made smooth by an employer-friendly deal with the union that represented the majority of the other mills. The weak collective agreement, which was negotiated prior to the workers being hired allowed for flexible job rotation, had no seniority provisions, and had starting wages that were lower than those within the collective agreements of other mills within the same local.

**Table 1:**

The number (and percentage) of references white and Aboriginal women made to incidences of discrimination or harassment and the number (and percentage) of individuals who described a positive or negative personal experience with the union.

	White women n=13		Aboriginal women n=10	
<b>Experiences of discrimination or harassment</b>				
a. None	15	(85)	7	(30)
b. Yes, from management	1	(8)	3	(30)
c. Yes, from co-workers	6	(38)	6	(60)

Additionally, despite a commitment to hire Aboriginal workers, there were no provisions that took cultural differences of Aboriginal workers into account. Last, when the softwood lumber industry headed into a downturn resulting from softwood lumber tariffs and a rising Canadian dollar the company attempted to save money through a series of layoffs at the co-owned mill the longest of which had been 7 months long. In particular, the increasing length of lay-offs influenced women's negative comments about their union.

Interviewer: *And does being unionized affect working conditions for you?*

Cree woman: *I haven't really noticed any big difference. They're taking our money but (pause) it hasn't saved us from losing our jobs for the past seven months and stuff like that.*

This women's negative statement about the union was rooted in unmet expectations from her union. She approached the union as an institution that should provide a service and not as an organization that she was part of using 'they' to describe the union. Although she hadn't internalized the values of the union, the woman's comments were not founded in individualism. Instead she presented herself as a member of a collective, stating 'taking *our* money.' The collectivity implicit in several Aboriginal women's accounts was also demonstrated by the stories that they chose to tell when criticizing the union. Women often made reference to other Aboriginal workers and not to themselves when providing examples of how workers were not being protected by the union.

Interviewer: *Do you feel that having a union improves your working conditions or changes them?*

Métis woman 2: *No, this is so absurd but I don't think our union does much for us, I really don't ... we have, like actually one lady ... that is no longer working there who- she was a dedicated employee. And it's just because I feel so badly for her. A very dedicated employee ... never missed a shift. She did get hurt last summer ... and then during our call backs she didn't get a call back and it is because she was hurt so she went and talked to the union and they said "oh well." ... and that's pretty much all they told her which I think was wrong because if you pay union dues, they're supposed to be there to help you...*

This woman was not opposed to unions but she did have expectations that were not met, stating 'this is so absurd' to communicate that the situation was outside of what would be expected for a union. She presented herself as part of a group of workers 'us' who were not represented by the union, and chose to provide an example of a fellow woman worker who was not assisted by the union when she was unjustly not called back after a layoff. She demonstrated solidarity with the woman and against the union asserting 'which I think was wrong.' Although her last statement that 'if you pay union dues, they're supposed to be there to help you,' demonstrates a service based orientation towards her union and not an ideological one, her concern with the well-being of the whole: the collective 'us,' and not in personal gain, demonstrates values of collectivity similar to that of union solidarity.

Several Aboriginal women interviewed made reference to Aboriginal culture's propensity towards collectivism at different points throughout their interviews. Traditional employment agreements do not take into account the

cultural norms of many Aboriginal workers (Voyageur 1997; Government of Canada 2002; Moran 2006). Specific examples mentioned by the women interviewed included the need for recognition of extended family as equal to immediate family, the importance of taking sufficient time off in case of the death of a family member, and the importance of days off for cultural community events such as National Aboriginal Day. The strong importance accorded to workers' connections to Aboriginal community outside of the workplace distinguished Aboriginal from white women workers.

Interviewer: *And what about extended family?*

Métis/Cree woman: *... there's no extended, like the Aboriginals, like Grand Council, they have the Indian National Day or whatever that is, or treaty days, no nothing like that, that's off. I don't agree with that either. When we first started working there they had their union book in place already, they made it themselves without our input.*

This Métis-Cree woman's response to my question, contrasted her experience working an Aboriginal organization, Grand Council, where Aboriginal cultural values were recognized with that of the mill where they were not. She used 'we' to denote Aboriginal workers, and 'they' to represent the union, highlighting how she felt that Aboriginal workers as a collective were outside of the union. The woman's statement linked the absence of input that Aboriginal workers had in creating the union contract, to the lack of recognition of Aboriginal culture and thus to her negative account of the union.

Some woman's accounts referred to a particular collectivism shared among the Aboriginal woman working in the mill. In response to a question about how the union had represented interests that were specific to Aboriginal workers, one Cree woman instead described how the union had not represented Aboriginal women. She recounted how one Aboriginal woman had been unable to change her shift to the day shift in order to take care of her daughter who had diabetes. She finished by stating "*We are a minority out there, there is only four women in the mill right now.*" indicating a sense of solidarity with the other Aboriginal women working at the mill.

## CONCLUSION

These findings demonstrate how understandings of what is meant by solidarity and collectivism are dependent on the context in which they are communicated (Hansen 2004). Understood from the perspective of white and

Aboriginal women's lives, negative comments about unions, even those that draw on popular anti-union statements, can be understood as forms of collectivism. Narrow understandings of solidarity, developed over time by traditional industrial workers in many unions, need to be challenged to include the insights from workers who belong to marginalized groups. In this respect these results support Steven Lopez's assertion that "Workers do not stand before the labour movement as unfilled containers – as generic 'prospective movement participants.' Rather, they have specific experiences, perceptions, and views of unions – and these are not all positive"(2004; 37). White and Aboriginal women in the northern prairies have different cultural and work experiences that both challenge and support traditional union notions of collectivity.

Women's feelings of guilt that were linked to inequality between workers within the mill and those in low-waged work in their communities point to the need for union locals to build solidarity that is inclusive of all workers and not only to those working within the mills. Organizing drives directed at low paid service sector workers or living wage campaigns in mill communities offer the possibility of building broader community support for unions while addressing employment inequality that is often based on gender and Aboriginal identity. Similarly, union officials need to ensure that Aboriginal peoples have voice and influence within their unions so that collective agreements are able to both reflect Aboriginal cultural difference and protect Aboriginal workers.

The specific examples presented here are in agreement with research that argues for a deepening of democracy in ways that allow marginalized groups to be better represented in union structures and at the bargaining table (Briskin 1999; Levesque et al. 2005). Most importantly, however, these examples show that marginalized workers' negative representations of unions often contain meanings that are compatible with union solidarity. The implication of this is that negative union sentiment can also be addressed through discussion among workers. Only through engaging with and not dismissing negative union sentiment, can unions begin to construct more inclusive and democratic forms of solidarity essential to union renewal.

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