

SEX, RACE & SACRIFICE

Union Organizing

By Patricia Chong

THE UNION CRY TO ORGANIZE THE unorganized has again become a rallying cry for the labour movements in both Canada and the United States, and it's not surprising. In both countries there has been an explosive growth in traditionally union-weak areas of the economy, such as in private service work, and in union-weak job classifications such as part-time and contract work. This has been matched with a decrease in union-strong sectors and job classifications. Another challenge for the labour movement is that women, racialized peoples (people of colour) and youth, who are over-represented in the growing number of casual, part-time and low-paid jobs, have been historically under-represented in unions — although this is changing. Thus, organizing these people is crucial to the labour movement's future.

Recognizing this, some unions are expanding their organizing departments by hiring people who mirror their target membership. Still, such hires remain in the minority according to Jonathan Eaton's analysis of an Ontario Federation of Labour organizer survey done in the late 1990s, with over 85 per cent of organizers being white, almost three-quarter male, and most over 40 years of age. What, I wondered, are the experiences of the small number of racialized and white women as organizing staff? How does gender and race affect the experience of organizing? And what can these experiences tell us about our labour movement and its future?

To get an idea, I interviewed three racialized and three white women organizers from three unions about any differences they'd seen between the treatment of male and female organizers, and compared their experiences to the existing research on organizers, which is largely about white men.

In interviewing these women, what became apparent is that they face the same challenges as other organizers, such as extensive travel, long hours of work and high emotional demands, as explored by American academic Daisy Rooks. However, the ways

in which women organizers experience these challenges are different. For example, while a heavy workload is an issue for all organizers, the women felt that they had to work harder to receive the same credit as their male peers. Said one, "I remember... feeling overworked and overwhelmed and, working with male co-workers, it seemed they were always so relaxed." She added, "It took me a little while to realize that they were so relaxed because they didn't have to work as much as I did, or they didn't take on responsibilities or the assignments I gave them to do."

The racialized women felt that they had to work even more to receive the same recognition that both men and white women received. "You do have to work twice as hard as a woman — especially as a woman of colour — to prove that you're capable of doing the work."

Not only did the racialized women feel that their work was not equally valued, but some felt that they were given the "grunt work." One racialized woman said that when the hardest work was being assigned, such as duties to be done in the early morning, late at night, or in bad weather, she would get it. Another added: "I think that if I weren't a young [racialized] woman, I wouldn't necessarily be taken from campaigns that I had started and developed that were sure wins [and see them] handed over to a white woman to win. I think I've been discriminated against in that way."

Organizing work has multiple dimensions that are valued differently. For example, union-vote victories are recognized and rewarded, whereas much of the less visible work, such as establishing strong worker committees and conducting corporate research that helps to achieve these victories, are less valued and rewarded. Thus, discrimination can occur as the organizer who starts a campaign may not be the one to finish it.

Organizing is even more difficult for women with children. One interviewee went so far as to say that "being a woman organizer and having a baby will

end your career." However, as another interviewee with children pointed out, it is the inflexibility, not necessarily the number of work hours, that creates problems. She recalls being told, "If you work late, then you can start late." But being told you can start late after working late the night before doesn't translate for mothers with young children: "I can't wake up at one o'clock and start my day. I wake up when my kids wake up," she says. Not surprisingly, these women have to rely on external support such as family, neighbours and paid help. Added to these difficulties is the social stigma attached to working mothers. "I think there is gossip about women who are organizers — how they aren't spending time with their kids and that they're bad mothers."

These gender stereotypes also negatively affect how women are perceived to deal with the stresses of union campaigns, and thus their ability to lead campaigns is questioned. For example, one organizer recalled derogatory comments made about "female behaviour" and women being "emotional."

While the call to organize the unorganized has largely focussed on precarious work and workers, some unions are replicating these inequalities within their own staff. The women spoke about organizing positions with long probationary periods and some that were contract positions. One interviewee worked as a contract employee for three years. Thus, in this sense, organizing itself is precarious work. As one woman put it: "Organizers are workers. We are the bottom feeders. We are the most precarious employees."

Racism and sexism also come into play in terms of the precarious nature of organizing work. One woman discussed how, in her experience, all organizers were hired on contract, but those who become permanent illustrate a race and gender bias. She recalled a staff conference where the contract staff who had become permanent staff were asked to stand up and identify themselves. Six people stood up and they were all white men. She commented that it was "blatant" and "in your face" that there was "no consideration of gender or equity balance."

Some unions appear to be quite happy hiring young organizers (defined by the Canadian Labour Congress as 30 years of age and under) because they are seen to be meeting diversity expectations, even when they hire a white man — because he's young. However, isolating the identity of youth allows unions to sidestep other equity seeking groups and also to maintain unrealistic expectations in terms of workload, unpredictable work hours and extensive travel demands. This is because, more often than not, youth are without family responsibilities and have the physical ability to do this work.

Simply hiring women and racialized people as staff is not enough, especially when they are not in positions of power. While most of the interviewees feel that their organizing departments are diverse, all of them feel that the organization as a whole is not, particularly when it comes to leadership posi-

tions. Said one, "We are the people who recruit, but the people in the position of power aren't a reflection of the membership. If our membership is largely people of colour, then why isn't our leadership? That poses really interesting, strong questions."

Thus, the diversity that workers see when dealing with organizers is not necessarily reflective of the union as a whole. Furthermore, the ghettoization of women, particularly racialized women, in the organizing department, which is well-known to have high turn-over and burn-out rates, is hugely problematic. This speaks to how women are brought into the labour movement on a platform of union renewal, only to leave rather than be nurtured into leaders.

The ways in which women organizers experience work challenges are different

The organizer model itself is exclusionary because it is based on a traditional white male (assumed heterosexual) worker model that took for granted that there was a woman at home to take care of domestic duties. Thus, union policies and procedures that seem fair actually exclude the very people that the labour movement wants to include, (as well as excluding white men who do not fit the model). For example, Australian academic Suzanne Franzway argues that union demands on time are more detrimental to women than men since women do the majority of domestic work. Women are faced with the double day of doing their paid work and then doing the unpaid work at home, or, in the case of union women, the triple day that includes their largely volunteer union work. As Canadian academic Linda Briskin says, sometimes being treated equally is not about being treated the same.

With some American unions losing about 50 per cent of their organizing staff annually and not having enough experienced organizers to run campaigns, change is necessary. However, rather than looking at the big picture and recognizing that the organizing standard is exclusionary, the response, often, is to individualize problems. Those who leave organizing are viewed as unable to "cut it" and less committed to trade union principles. This dishonouring is one aspect of what Rooks calls the "cowboy mentality" (and what I will call the "soldier mentality") that she observed in some organizers. The soldier mentality is also characterized by viewing organizing as "movement work" that is "more than a job" and superior to other union work, such as servicing.

Lastly, there is a boot camp attitude, which encourages militancy, toughness, and sacrifice. The soldier mentality reinforces racism and sexism because, without understanding how the standard is exclusive and acknowledging workplace discrimination, one might conclude that women, and, in

particular, racialized women, are incapable of the work because they leave.

In terms of how race and gender affect the experience of organizing, all the organizers agreed that diversity is important, because women and racialized people need to see themselves reflected in the union in order to identify with it. Speaking about race, several organizers pointed out that it is also the shared cultural background, the experience of being immigrants and how people "go through the same things," as well as the ability to speak the workers' native language, that can serve as a foundation upon which to build a relationship that allows for a serious discussion about unions. However, the organizers also discussed how while organizing is easier when there is a match, this is not a guarantee of union support. One racialized woman spoke about how

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she is expected to get every card signed when dealing with workers of the same race, whereas if she is dealing with workers of a different race, the expectations are lower. Justifying the need for greater diversity in union staff is tricky because arguing that identity does matter, especially in organizing workers of the same demographic, can easily become an argument based on a racist belief of a fixed and inborn attribute that an organizer can tap into to acquire worker support for the union.

While both racialized and white women have dealt with workers discriminating against them based on their skin colour or gender, the white women organizers spoke about the uncomfortable position they are in when some white workers assume they can say racist things because they are the same race. Said one, "I get racist remarks and it's because they look at me and they see this straight white woman and think it must be okay to say these things."

In this sense, white organizers may be dealing with more racism, although not directed at them. This is not to say that racialized workers are not

prejudiced toward other groups. The larger question is how organizers should handle this. "The hardest part for me organizing is sitting down and talking to someone who is racist and homophobic," said one white organizer. "I've never felt satisfied with my reaction, which is usually to change the subject. You get torn between winning this campaign or trying to educate someone, which may actually turn them against the union because you're challenging their belief structure. What's worth more? And then a part of me is thinking: 'Do we want to organize these people anyways?'"

When she tries to discuss within her union how to best deal with such workers, she says she finds little support: it is "never dealt with." However, drawing from other research, when racialized organizers bring up issues of racism, their commitment to the movement is questioned. More training is required to prepare organizers to deal with issues like racism, sexism and homophobia, but the problem needs to be recognized first.

In terms of matching gender, the organizers agreed that women workers are more comfortable speaking to women organizers. However, some of the women observed that male organizers are seen to be "in positions of authority," and that workers tend to "trust what a man says more than what a woman says." The women organizers also felt that not matching genders could be, at times, advantageous (i.e. women organizing men). Several organizers made the comment that male workers "don't have to worry about being a man in front of another male organizer." By this they meant that men, faced with a woman organizer, were given an opportunity to be vulnerable and emotional about the difficulties they faced at work because the woman was "not a competitor." On the other hand, the women organizers talked about sexual harassment and health and safety concerns, especially when visiting male workers at home alone. These examples illustrate how diversity and identity are incredibly complex. However, these issues have only been handled superficially by the labour movement, and the banner of diversity has sometimes been embraced for the wrong reasons.

Organizers often situate these experiences in a crisis environment that is especially popular in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Canada. While the exact meaning of crisis varies, it is usually defined as a problem of declining union density rates, a problem which threatens organized labour's power. However, if the problem is primarily about numbers, the labour movement's principles of diversity, democracy, social justice and worker power are not necessarily included in the solution of increasing union density for four reasons. First, diversity becomes only about gaining access to target membership groups and nothing more. Issues of democracy, diversity and social justice are sidelined. Second, union membership numbers are not direct indicators of worker militancy and power, and an increased union density rate

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can be achieved through cooperating with business (top-down) rather than engaging with, and mobilizing, workers (bottom-up). Third, while declining union density rates should be taken seriously, we need to be cautious of the crisis mentality because it is used to shut down debate and justify undemocratic practices such as forced mergers. Fourth, when the crisis and soldier mentalities intersect, less powerful members are further marginalized, because it encourages self-sacrifice and self-censorship. In other words, racialized and white women organizers are asked to self-sacrifice and self-censor because the labour movement's survival is at stake. To talk about union-based workplace discrimination now would risk being accused of not being in solidarity. Yet, in refusing to deal with these inequalities as experienced by the women organizers like those I interviewed, the crisis mentality is undermining the labour movement's attempt at renewal.

While I hesitate to use the word "crisis," we do face significant challenges as trade unionists. However, shortcut solutions, which are symptomatic of a crisis mentality, are self-defeating. Organizer burn-out matters little if the end goal is to raise union density. Diversity matters little, if sought only to access potential members also in order to raise union density. However, union density does not, in and of itself, equal union power. The labour movement, in its efforts to transform and renew itself, may talk a good game about its commitment to worker power, democracy, diversity and social justice — but we must act according to these principles. And this leads to the question: What happens after the workers have organized? This is a crucial issue, especially as more women and racialized people join unions and refuse to be used as pawns. We must actively deal with equality issues because they go far beyond the organizing department and are key to the labour movement's future. This is not to say that all labour's problems are internal or that all problems will be solved with more representation. However, issues of equality are tied to issues of worker empowerment, which act as the foundation for a working-class movement. There may be many detours, but there are simply no shortcuts.

Patricia Chong is currently attending the Global Labour University (see www.global-labour-university.org). She first became involved with the labour movement when she and her part-time co-workers organized their workplace, the University of Toronto Bookstore, and she subsequently worked as a union organizer for several years. Chong remains an active member of the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance. This article is based on her thesis "Sex, Race & Sacrifice: Union Organizers in the New Labour Movement" for the Labour Studies MA program at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. The women interviewed were promised anonymity. Chong invites readers to respond to her article and to submit their own stories as well to **Our Times**: editor@ourtimes.ca.



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