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# **Unions, Equity, and the Path to Renewal**



*Edited by Janice R. Foley and Patricia L. Baker*

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of*

PATRICIA LOUISE BAKER,

*whose life and academic work were guided by feminist ideals.*

*Her kindness, gentle heart, and steadfast support*

*were a comfort to all who knew her.*

*Patricia will be sorely missed.*



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## **Unions, Equity, and the Path to Renewal**



# Introduction

*Janice Foley*

Equity within unions is not just one of several prerequisites for union renewal but, rather, the *central* prerequisite. Current renewal strategies, most recently summarized in Kumar and Schenk (2006a, 36), overlap significantly with those that female union activists have practised for many years in an effort to advance equity for marginalized members (e.g., Briskin 2002; Briskin and McDermott 1993; Briskin and Yanz 1983). That they are being touted as “new” indicates that the many ways female and equity activists have contributed to union strength in the past have gone largely unnoticed within the larger union community. Deep-seated gender and race biases, which have been an unfortunate but well-documented part of the history of organized labour (e.g., Creese 1999; Forrest 2001, 2007; Kainer 1998; Sugiman 1994), may account for this, but it has now become imperative to eradicate these biases.

Labour force demographics have changed considerably in the past thirty years, resulting in a much more diverse union membership today, and diversity is expected to increase in the future as well (Luffman and Sussman 2007; Statistics Canada 2005, 2008). The labour force has “feminized” (Briskin and McDermott 1993), and unions must now cater to the needs of women and racialized and Aboriginal groups if they hope to attract new members, satisfy and retain existing ones, increase membership participation levels, and develop strong ties with their local and international communities. Organizing the service sector, where the majority of the unorganized and many previously unionized workers are now working as a result of economic restructuring, must be prioritized for social justice reasons and for union renewal. These jobs tend to be poorly paid, part-time, and insecure (Broad and Antony 2006; Zeytinoglu and Muteshi 2000a), yet unions have focused most of their organizing efforts elsewhere (Yates 2006).

To renew union strength, a new model of unionization is required that is inclusive, truly democratic, responsive to the needs of all members, and committed to improving the lot of workers everywhere. The difficulties of

transitioning to the new model should not be underestimated, however, for changing the status quo will interfere with existing feelings of entitlement, creating conflict, and affecting union solidarity.

Insights that arise from an equity sensitive analysis of union renewal strategies, which are presented here, add considerably to the debate on union renewal. The contributors to this book document the equity deficit within the Canadian labour movement; suggest how union cultures, practices, and structures might be changed to enhance union solidarity and promote renewal; identify issues around which successful political action might be mobilized; and provide examples of how to reposition organized labour as a central institution in the lives of workers. A feminist vision of unions as instruments of social justice for all workers, and an appreciation of union and feminist activists' efforts over the past thirty years to build union democracy, solidarity, and strength by organizing women and other equity group members within Canadian unions, inform the discussion. "Equity" as defined here derives from the 1984 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment. Commissioner Rosalie Abella (1984, 3) concluded that "sometimes equality means treating people the same, despite their differences, and sometimes it means treating them as equals by accommodating their differences." As Briskin (2006a, 13) puts it, "Equity refers ... to what is fair under the circumstances."

The idea for this book arose from the 2005 workshop "Advancing the Equity Agenda Inside Unions and at the Bargaining Table," sponsored by the Centre for Research on Work and Society at York University. More than 120 unionists, academics, students, individuals with human rights or equity responsibilities, and members of the general public gathered to discuss the degree of equity progress achieved within Canadian unions to date, barriers to progress, and strategies for moving forward. The workshop made it clear that equity in unions remains a work in progress, although significant advances have been made since the early 1970s, when the second wave of the women's movement gained momentum in Canada.

### **Equity Progress to Date**

Other recent publications in the mainstream literature (e.g., Hunt and Ray-side 2007; Kumar and Schenk 2006a) have documented the many advances on the equity front that have occurred since the 1970s. Some of the important gains include the higher priority given to equity initiatives today; union constitutions that now employ inclusive language and afford members protection from discrimination and harassment by other members; equity structures of all types that exist in most unions; increasing numbers of women and other equity group members in formal leadership positions; a union bargaining agenda that embraces many issues not considered legitimate before, such as violence against women and work-life balance; and



protection against harassment and discrimination in the workplace that recognizes the multiple forms of oppression that can occur when gender, race, and class intersect (Briskin 2006a; Zeytinoglu and Muteshi 2000b).

However, legislative interventions that legitimated, for instance, the bargaining of gay rights and harassment protection contributed to some of these outcomes (Kumar 1993). Also, progress has been uneven (Rayside 2007), with women and public sector workers in particular, and more recently men and women with diverse sexual preferences, being the primary beneficiaries. Unionized part-time workers have yet to fully benefit from the fair-pay principles espoused by unions (Forrest 2007; Kainer 1998), and significant inequity is still faced by people of colour, racialized minorities, youth, and Aboriginals (Zeytinoglu and Muteshi 2000a). Implementing equity policy at the local level still poses difficulties (Briskin 2007). The “overt sexism” (Briskin 2006a) that has long prevented equal participation by women and equity group members in union affairs (Briskin and McDermott 1993) still exists. Babysitting services, for instance, are not automatically provided at all union events, and meetings continue to be scheduled at times that fail to accommodate domestic responsibilities.

Although unions have substantially broadened their bargaining agenda, the other equity concerns identified in Briskin and McDermott (1993) remain, affecting women as well as other equity group members. While exceptions exist, unions still help to perpetuate a gender-segregated labour market, one in which males hold the full-time, high-paying jobs, while women work part-time, often with inferior wage scales and benefits (Creese 1999; Kainer 1998). Unions continue to adhere to outmoded views of male breadwinners, male-headed families, and generic workers (Briskin 2006a), which is apparent in their reluctance to advocate on behalf of the newer membership classes if more traditional members will be negatively affected (Forrest 2001, 2007). Union structures and practices continue to marginalize non-traditional members, and although there has been some effort in the past fifteen years to correct inequities, many equity advocates feel that more should have been done (Forrest 2007; Haiven 2007). Too often women and other equity group members feel that their concerns are taken too lightly by their leaders and that they are effectively shut out of union decision-making processes (Foley 2006; Kumar and Schenk 2006b; also Clarke Walker; Edelson; Wall; this volume). There is still much room for improvement on the equity front within the Canadian labour movement.

### **Equity and Union Renewal**

Contemporary union renewal strategies include organizing the unorganized, increasing member participation to facilitate mobilization for change, coalition formation within the external community and other social movement organizations to increase the efficacy of political action, merging to

free up resources, more training to improve leadership effectiveness and membership commitment to union goals, and partnering with employers and government to advance and protect member interests (Kumar and Schenk 2006a, 36). The mainstream literature has started to recognize the connection between equity and union renewal (e.g., Buttigieg, Deery, and Iverson 2008; Lévesque, Murray, and Le Queux 2005), but female union equity advocates have been employing many of the “new” renewal strategies for a long time.

For example, Briskin (2002) indicates that union women have for several decades actively built coalitions with community groups, social movement organizations, and politicians to attain equity goals. These coalitions have proven highly instrumental in achieving such advances as equal pay for work of equal value, employment equity legislation, higher minimum wages, and reproductive choice. Pressure exerted by coalition partners and equity advocates has expanded the union bargaining agenda to include the general concerns of workers (Forrest 2001). Coalition building has kept unions abreast of emerging community concerns likely to resonate with their members, which has supported collective action. It has also strengthened community support and enhanced union legitimacy within the local community and in society in general, thus facilitating organizing drives and moving unions further along the path of social unionism, deemed essential to their survival.

Overcoming participatory and democratic deficits within unions, acknowledged as intrinsic to the renewal problem (Canadian Auto Workers 2003; Fairbrother 2006; Johnson and Jarley 2004; Lévesque and Murray 2006; Lévesque, Murray, and Le Queux 2005), has been another goal of these advocates. They have pressured union leaders to introduce affirmative action processes for staff hiring, filling educational seats, and accessing leadership positions (Briskin 2006a, 2006b). But they have also identified the limitations of doing so, cautioning that numerical strategies by themselves do not ensure strong equity group representation on union executive committees or in staff positions such as union organizer, believed critical to the success of organizing in new sectors (Curtin 1997; Yates 2006). Activists have therefore strongly pushed for the elimination of exclusionary structures and practices that limit the talent pool for leadership and staff positions. They have also taken up the issue of union merger as renewal strategy, pointing out its potential downsides in terms of member satisfaction (Waddington 2005).

In addition, advocates have pushed for other structural changes targeted at democratizing unions, such as equity conferences and women-only educational events and the like, as well as the establishment of women’s and other equity committees (Briskin and McDermott 1993). These committees, modelling more democratic practices, have given marginalized workers voice and provided opportunities for confidence building and the development

of group-based political identities. Because of the confidence-building, identity-formation possibilities associated with separate organizing, this type of organizing is a vehicle for recruiting equity group members to leadership and staff positions (Briskin 2006b). Equity advocates have advised that these committee structures must be sufficiently integrated into traditional union structures to prevent organizational marginalization, yet sufficiently autonomous to allow strong demands for change to be formulated.

In a further attempt to improve union democracy, equity advocates have encouraged coalition building within unions, across equity committees (Briskin 2007), to ensure that the marginalization of any group's concerns does not occur and that common interests can be more vigorously pursued. They have also pushed for structural linkages between the committees, the union executive, and negotiating committees, to increase the power of these committees to achieve changes that protect and advance the interests of their members. For instance, they have tried to ensure that committee demands go directly to the negotiating table, that each identity group is fairly represented there, and that the leadership backs these demands (Briskin 2006b).

Therefore, it can be seen that efforts to advance equity have provided insights regarding the utility of some of the contemporary union renewal recommendations, and have identified equity as the prerequisite for their success. By pursuing an equity agenda, advocates have positioned unions for renewal by targeting exclusionary practices and structures, improving organized labour's image in the community, supporting efforts to organize the unorganized, increasing membership involvement and support for equity initiatives, strengthening equity group members' attachment to the union, improving labour's potential to mount effective campaigns to secure a more labour-friendly political environment, and developing leaders who are more sensitive to and accountable for meeting the needs of equity group members.

### **Assessing Organized Labour's Capacity for Renewal**

In keeping with the view that union renewal is an organizational change initiative (Kumar and Schenk 2006b; Orfald 2006), and because the organizational strategy literature indicates that such initiatives are usually implemented following an analysis of the organization's resource strengths and weaknesses and an assessment of the opportunities and threats that exist in the environment (Thompson, Strickland, and Gamble 2007), it seems appropriate to examine organized labour's capacity to renew along those lines, using the insights generated by the contributors to this book.

According to the contributors, who have examined the issues around equity and union renewal from a social justice perspective, a number of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats exist. In the strength

category, potent resources include equity structures and the years of experience feminist union activists have had in democratizing union practices to encourage non-traditional workers to join and participate in unions, increase their participation therein, and encourage them to stay. The alliances female activists maintain with external constituency groups, locally, nationally, and internationally, and with community groups, constitute another strength that must be maintained. Separate organizing as a means of growing equity-sensitive leaders and cross-constituency organizing as a vehicle for building solidarity across equity groups are also viewed as strengths.

Some of the major weaknesses are union structures and cultures that, in addition to marginalizing many members' interests, create representational deficiencies within leadership ranks, fail to recognize the leadership afforded by female union activists, and produce leadership skill deficits when it comes to advancing the equity agenda. Systemic barriers such as inadequate equity training budgets for members and leaders exacerbate these problems. Another weakness is the outmoded view that the membership is one homogeneous mass. That view continues to flourish at least in part because of a failure to document the growing diversity within union ranks. The lack of documentation allows leaders to escape their obligations to represent diverse viewpoints, which is a serious problem in itself. But more significantly, this outmoded vision reinforces traditional union values and existing structures and ensures that diverse membership needs go unmet, and that existing gender, race, and class biases go unchallenged (Zeytinoglu and Muteshi 2000b). The result is the erosion of union solidarity, the growth of membership apathy, and problems with organizing and retaining members, all of which threaten union security and political effectiveness.

One opportunity that exists is the possibility of capitalizing on the changing labour force demographics and diversification of the membership by embracing the recommendations of the Canadian Labour Congress' anti-racism task force. Along the same lines, the increasingly difficult working conditions that prevail in the service sector where most new jobs are being created, and more general problems emerging within the workforce in regard to work-family balance and the plights of non-standard workers and new immigrants, provide a strong incentive for workers to unionize and/or mobilize, if the labour movement can address these concerns. The opportunity also exists to take action to expand union capacity to renew by enhancing leader capabilities. Developing the necessary training programs and removing systemic barriers to get more minority-group members into leadership are two options. Increasing funding to equity groups would also facilitate the development of potential leaders.

Finally, some real threats that could materialize if the pace of progress toward achieving equity within Canadian unions does not pick up were identified. The first is that the slow progress on equity is making some

equity-seeking groups turn to worker centres and community groups, rather than unions, to achieve gains for workers. This is eroding union strength and legitimacy. A second is that the legal environment has changed with the passage of the Canadian Charter of Rights and human rights laws. The state-granted autonomy that has allowed unions to devise ways of addressing the needs of their members without interference could be taken away if unions do not prove themselves capable of conducting their day-to-day business in a manner that satisfactorily upholds the rights of non-traditional members. At that point, moving the equity agenda forward will no longer be an option – it will be mandated not by the membership but by the state.

### **Overview of the Book**

The twelve chapters in this book are organized into four parts. Three chapters are written by black female trade unionists, while the remainder are written by some of the foremost feminist or equity scholars and union activists in the world. The voices of women of colour are privileged over those of other equity-seeking groups in this book because, despite the Canadian Labour Congress anti-racism task force recommendations tabled in 1997 (Canadian Labour Congress 1997), progress on the race dimension has been slow to materialize (Rayside 2007).

### **Part 1: The Equity Struggle – Past and Future**

Chapter 1, by Jan Kainer, summarizes thirty years of effort by equity advocates to realize a feminist-inspired vision of a union movement that is inclusive and democratic, and that seeks to advance the interests of *all* working people, unionized or not. Here the many contributions women have made to union revitalization via means such as coalition building, rank-and-file activism, and adaptation to the new worker identities and forms of work that have emerged over the past two decades are summarized. Kainer argues that the union renewal literature has not acknowledged the gendering of the labour movement, or the role that women's organizing has played in transforming the labour movement and helping it reposition itself in the face of neo-liberal globalization, thus assuring its future survival.

Chapter 2, by Marie-Josée Legault, presents one highly undesirable possible future for the labour movement that *could* materialize if unions continue to underplay the importance of equity. Legault examines the implications for unions of the federal and provincial human rights legislation and the Canadian Charter of Rights. She points out that there are now two competing definitions of equity, one that is satisfied by equal treatment and another, based on the new human rights legislation, that demands equality of results and therefore preferential treatment for certain groups. She notes that as membership diversity increases, unions can no longer justify their actions

on the basis of majority rule or seniority. She warns that unless unions find acceptable ways to deal with the increasingly diverse interests of their members, conflict could ensue that could remove unions' legal right to represent certain minority interests, as well as destroy union solidarity. She describes one such conflict currently moving through the courts, which arose from the negotiation of a two-tier wage clause that is allegedly discriminatory. This is a cautionary tale that highlights the link between union revitalization and equity.

## **Part 2: The Equity Struggle – Black Trade Unionists Speak Out**

Chapter 3, which opens Part 2, consists of an interview conducted by Miriam Edelson with Beverley Johnson, a long-time union activist, and her daughter, Marie Clarke Walker, currently an executive vice-president with the Canadian Labour Congress. It documents the historic and ongoing struggle for equity waged by people of colour, and the continuing acute problem of racism in Canada and within unions. They issue a warning that if better progress on equity does not materialize soon, people of colour will turn to institutions other than unions to seek redress, with obvious consequences for union membership numbers and union renewal.

In Chapter 4, Carol Wall, another long-time union activist and person of colour, presents statistics documenting the changing face of Canada's labour force, which is projected to become more feminized, more racialized, and more Aboriginal. She points out that the labour movement has been slow to keep up with changing demographics to date and asserts that, in order to maintain its vitality, the movement will have to approach the issues confronting it from an equity perspective, rather than from the perspective of straight, white, Anglo-Saxon males. She warns that many of the most underprivileged workers are already turning to worker advocacy centres for help, rather than to unions, because of unions' continuing failure to respond to their needs. She believes that it is time to turn leadership over to "people who look and think differently" because the continuation of this trend could put the future of the labour movement at risk.

In Chapter 5, the final chapter in Part 2, Marie Clarke Walker draws on her experiences in the Canadian Labour Congress and the Ontario labour movement to elaborate on the causes and consequences of the limited progress made in advancing equity for racialized people within the labour movement. She asserts that many changes of a substantive nature are needed to accelerate progress but recognizes that if the leadership continues to deny that equity within unions is a problem, the necessary changes are unlikely to materialize. Like Wall, she warns that the consequences could be severe if these changes are not made. She sets out a ten-point action plan to rectify this situation and insists that the committees, working groups, and designated

positions that have been created must be better resourced to advance the equity agenda.

### **Part 3: Equity, Solidarity, and Union Renewal**

The three chapters in Part 3 all target internal union practices and structures that affect equity progress and union renewal by impacting membership participation rates and union solidarity, the underpinnings of collective action. Chapter 6, by Anne Forrest, examines what types of issues unions should pursue in an effort to mobilize what is, at present, a largely complacent or indifferent union membership (Canadian Auto Workers 2003, 6). Forrest points out that acting as a “sword of justice” has strengthened unions in two past periods, the 1930s to 1950s and the 1970s to 1980s. As she sees it, organized labour today is putting the interests of the most advantaged workers (generally white, highly skilled, and employed full time) ahead of those of other workers, many of whom are equity group members, contingent job holders, and not unionized. Noting that union leaders have historically been drawn primarily from the advantaged group, she argues convincingly that the future survival of the labour movement lies with improving the lot of the most disadvantaged.

Chapter 7, by Janice Foley, summarizes two research studies, both based on data collected from female union activists. These studies sought an explanation for why, despite a great deal of effort since the early 1970s to achieve equitable treatment for non-traditional union members, and substantial growth in their numbers since then, equity remains elusive. Even though a decade separated her two studies, she found that the perceived obstacles to equity progress remained relatively constant. Her analysis resulted in the development of a conceptual model of equity progress within unions, as well as the propositions that the formal leadership plays a significant role in determining to what extent equity is or is not achieved and that failure to vigorously pursue equity objectives will imperil union revitalization.

In Chapter 8, Linda Brisikin examines how coalition building between and across equity-seeking groups *within* unions contributes to union revitalization by building solidarity. Her main focus is on what types of organizing structures contribute to unity in diversity, for example, by protecting the particular interests of each equity-seeking group while enabling a common equity agenda to be advanced. She believes these structures must reflect a deep understanding of intersectional oppressions and white skin privilege. Drawing her insights from case studies of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), and the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF), she describes three possible types of cross-constituency organizing structures and how they initially appear to be working out. She concludes that what she calls a dual structure,

one that supports constituency organizing but also establishes an umbrella committee with representation from each of the equity-seeking groups, may be the most effective. She emphasizes that union renewal and equity initiatives are inextricably entwined.

#### **Part 4: International Perspectives on Equity and Union Renewal**

In Part 4, the focus shifts from a Canadian to an international perspective on equity and union renewal, and how it can be achieved. Chapter 9, by Barbara Pocock and Karen Brown, explores the unique characteristics of Australian unions, their relationship with the Labor Party, and the strategies they have employed to advance equity since the early 1980s under governments that, at times, have been less than labour friendly. They describe a recent community-based campaign organized around a gendered discourse of fairness that was hugely successful in re-establishing the Australian labour movement as a central institution in the lives of workers. They point out, however, that in focusing declining union resources on this campaign, other previously hard-won gains were sacrificed, highlighting the need for fair representation strategies to ensure agreement exists on what are acceptable trade-offs. Their chapter identifies work-family balance as a new priority area for the Australian labour movement.

Chapter 10, by Mary Margaret Fonow and Suzanne Franzway, links union revitalization to the presence of separate spaces where women can identify and articulate their needs, create feminist politics, and develop the will and ability to contest existing power structures within unions. They offer three examples of how union feminists in Canada, the United States, and Australia have created such spaces in unlikely places and by so doing have secured workplace rights and economic and social justice for women. Echoing Briskin's chapter, they suggest that these separate spaces constitute mobilizing structures that allow solidarity to be developed internally, as well as externally with the women's movement, and that a better understanding and appreciation of mobilizing structures and strategies like these, which encourage women's participation in unions, would help to revitalize the labour movement.

In Chapter 11, Anne McBride and Jeremy Waddington examine the European evidence on how union amalgamations affect women's representation within unions and whether they lead to union renewal. They examine three types of amalgamations: those involving unions with exclusively female members, those with unions where the majority of members are male, and those they call "big bang," or transformative. They find that although amalgamations can contribute to renewal by reforming union structures to make them more representative of and therefore more attractive to women and thereby safeguard member retention, those outcomes are contingent on whether or not they enhance member satisfaction. They point out that the



needs of members, rather than structural considerations per se, should be the focus of union renewal efforts and that more research is needed to determine what structures, procedures, and practices are most appropriate for female trade unionists' representation.

Part 4 concludes with a chapter by Jane Parker that, drawing upon several empirical studies of UK unions, addresses the contributions women's committees can and do make to union revitalization, which she feels go largely unnoticed. She contends in Chapter 12 that these committees not only facilitate organizing efforts but also generate support for union campaigns and enhance the empowerment and representation of neglected constituents. She notes that these outcomes are hard to quantify but result in greater political influence for the labour movement and enhance internal efficiency. She further contends that women's committees can teach unions a great deal about inclusivity, coalition building, alternative ways of operating, and solidarity, and should therefore be held in greater esteem, echoing Fonow and Franzway's belief. The volume ends on a high note, with Parker pointing out that when both quantitative and qualitative indicators of union health are considered, the labour movement is in better shape than is commonly believed, and that women's committees provide a great many resources upon which the union movement can draw as it seeks to renew.

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## **Part 1**

# The Equity Struggle – Past and Future



# 1

## Gendering Union Renewal: Women's Contributions to Labour Movement Revitalization

*Jan Kainer*

Since the onset of neo-liberal globalization, unions have lost members and labour movements have struggled to retain their legitimacy. The problem of union recovery has created a large literature on how labour movements can survive in the new global economy (e.g., Boeri, Brugiavini, and Calmfors 2001; Fairbrother and Griffin 2002; Fairbrother and Yates 2003; Frege and Kelly 2004; Kumar and Schenk 2006; Harrod and O'Brien 2002; Jose 2002; Rose and Chaison 2001; Verma and Kochan 2004). This chapter summarizes key themes in the union renewal literature and argues that the contributions of women's labour organizing are given scant consideration in the current debates on labour revitalization.<sup>1</sup> Most of the scholarship on union renewal starts with the premise that alternative forms of organizing are a recent response to labour movement decline. Coalition building, organizing the unorganized, diversifying rank-and-file activism, and other core elements of renewal are typically presented as an outgrowth of the "new" social unionism, emerging from struggles to advance the labour agenda in an era of economic globalization. It is suggested here that significant aspects of labour renewal predate contemporary revitalization efforts. Many feminist initiatives challenging labour on diversity, equity, and social justice organizing can be traced to women's labour activism starting in the 1970s. Given that union feminists developed alternative models of organizing that are similar to or even the same as those proposed by renewal scholars, there needs to be greater acknowledgement of the lessons to be learned from their experience. Yet, surprisingly, there is often little or no discussion of the implications of decades of women's labour organizing for union renewal.

As shown below, at least two reasons can be offered to explain this absence. First, the union renewal literature tends to begin analysis in the late 1980s or the 1990s, thereby missing earlier feminist engagement challenging unions. As a result, the contemporary literature on renewing labour movements borrows heavily, albeit unconsciously, on the traditions and successes of women's labour organizing as potential strategies for renewal, without

according credit to these historic origins. A second reason for this gap is that the feminist literature on women and unions (e.g., Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail 1988; Beccalli 1996; Briskin 1994, 2002; Briskin and McDermott 1993; Briskin and Yanz 1983; Cobble 1993, 2004, 2007; Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Crain 1994; Creese 1999; Franzway 2000a, 2000b; Parker 2002; Spalter-Roth, Hartmann, and Collins 1994; Warskett 1996; White 1993) seems to exist independently of the work of contemporary scholars interested in union revitalization. In some instances, reference to women's labour activism is entirely absent (e.g., Fairbrother and Hammer 2005 on labour internationalism); in other cases, limited attention is paid to women's past experience in the realm of union organizing (e.g., organizing the unorganized); but most important, there is a tendency to neglect the implications of *gendering* as a coherent force for political mobilization and change – a process that has tremendous transformative potential for labour movements. This chapter serves as an intervention in the ongoing debates on union renewal and is intended to establish the significance of the labour feminist political project for labour movement revitalization.

Since the second-wave women's movement, women's labour organizing has exhibited a dynamic political struggle to redefine the gender politic of labour movements, what I refer to as "gendering" labour. Women unionists, in alliance with women's movements, issued a feminist challenge to make visible, and resist, the social structures and processes that systematically place men and women in different and often unequal social locations. The feminist challenge to traditional unionism was driven by feminist praxis and activism in coalition with social movements committed to a vision of social justice. Informed by gender-difference ideology, gendering is linked to a broader change project to oppose social inequities within and outside labour movements (see Acker 2006, 10). A feminist-inspired equity agenda promoting substantive equality gains for equity-seeking constituencies (e.g., women, racialized groups and the disabled),<sup>2</sup> and represented in policies such as pay equity and affirmative action, established a tangible political program for feminist mobilization. Equity-organizing strategies have injected greater internal union democracy and built membership support for a social movement model of unionism, furthering social and economic justice.

Although gendering operates as a progressive political force for accomplishing transformational change within labour movements, it has not been a smooth or unchallenged process. As Rayside (2007) observes, labour movements have been far more committed to discussion and debate on policy and process than they have to substantive changes regarding participation and implementation of labour feminist (e.g., equity) policy and procedure. Clarke Walker, Edelson, and Wall (chapters, this volume) make the same point about equity action plans and the representation of racialized minorities in the Canadian labour movement. Gendering labour movement policy

and practices involves contestation; it entails struggle over inclusion of women and equity groups in labour movement organizational structures and in labour resistance strategies. Especially contentious are attempts to fully integrate the fights of minorities for social and economic equality in the political action of labour movements. Invoking a gender lens when examining labour movement organizational practices challenges traditional unionism and may produce alternative approaches to union structure and policy, but it simultaneously creates intense conflict, internal and external to labour movements, over the implementation of an equity program. This gender dimension of trade union activity has not been adequately documented by labour renewal scholarship even though it has been ongoing for several decades within many labour movements, and in coalitions between the new social movements, in many industrialized economies.

### **Themes in the Union Renewal Literature**

The literature on union renewal is very large and continues to grow, but broadly, two major themes run throughout. Wide-ranging subjects relate to the problem of union decline (e.g., decreasing union density, diminishing bargaining power, the weakening influence of labour in the global political economy), while another set of topics focuses on ways to bolster unionism (e.g., cross-border solidarity, corporate campaigns, union mergers, improving labour law). The primary trajectory in the renewal literature is to determine optimal strategies for rebuilding labour movements. Reference is often made to assessing best practices (Kumar and Schenk 2006, 19) in relation to union structures, policies, and organizational features of labour organizations or developing a “bigger tool kit,” “both old and new,” that challenges conventional ways of doing things, to revive labour movements (Turner 2004, 4).

In general, arguments about developing strategic capacity based on vision, agenda, and discourse; promoting internal solidarity (enlarging membership participation); and promoting external solidarity through labour and community alliances or coalitions are repeated themes in much of the literature. Typically, if gender-specific or feminist issues are acknowledged, it is in reference to expanding union membership and promoting an inclusive organizational culture for women and other equity-seeking groups that have tended to be ignored and under-represented by labour organizations (e.g., Behrens, Hamann, and Hurd 2004; Yates 2003, 2006a). The issue of inclusive representation is frequently identified as a key factor in renewal strategies. Another common observation is that union growth depends upon devising a broader worker agenda that will appeal to a wide constituency “informed by a broader set of values incorporating the importance of membership involvement, equity and social justice” (Lévesque and Murray 2006, 121).

There is considerable agreement between renewal scholars and labour feminists on the overall strategic direction needed for labour movement

revitalization. For instance, both literatures point to the importance of re-vamping union structures to promote greater internal union democracy and inclusive participation of members, as well as revisioning labour movement ideology in a more radical direction (e.g., Robertson and Murningham 2006). There is also recognition by some authors of the importance of organizing women workers in unions and their potential for union renewal (e.g., Clawson 2003; Hurd 2004; Yates 2006a, 2006b). Where the two literatures diverge is in documenting and recognizing women's previous (historic) contributions, especially in relation to the development of a gender or equity lens. The process of gendering not only involves organizing "women as women" but also entails mobilizing and applying a "difference" feminist perspective in the organization of labour movement activity. "Gendering" has a broad meaning and refers to the progressive transformation of labour movement strategy, policy, and practices through the application of a feminist agenda (see, e.g., Briskin, 1994, 2002; Cobble, 2007; Colgan and Ledwith, 2000, 2002).

By not acknowledging second-wave labour feminist activism in relation to equity organizing, and by not recognizing it as a mobilizing force in union transformation, there remains confusion about what should be considered new and effective renewal strategies. Moreover, as seen below, many strategies identified as new or innovative have been tried, sometimes successfully but oftentimes unsuccessfully because of competing interests within the labour movement and also external forces. It is important to recognize the organizing strategies that have been ongoing for some time and to acknowledge their strengths and limitations if we are to really determine what will move union renewal efforts forward.

In this chapter I emphasize gender as a category of analysis to illustrate how and why women's organizing is particularly relevant to evaluating ongoing debates on union revitalization. I argue that feminist unionist activists and feminist labour scholarship offer an important perspective on understanding the strengths and weaknesses of renewal strategies. Labour feminists' views of what works and does not work for union revitalization should be seriously considered by union leaders and labour scholars interested in rebuilding labour movements. I also argue that the transformative potential of gendering labour movement policy and practices must be better understood and acknowledged as a vital approach to achieving necessary change to ensure trade union survival.

The following discussion is a thematic overview of key historical developments in the second wave of labour women's organizing, which attempts to show how labour movements have been gendered by feminist unionist politics. The Canadian labour movement is primarily emphasized, with some comparisons from other national contexts. Given the huge literature on union renewal, it is not possible to offer an in-depth review of the many



debates or provide detailed case examples of women's organizing; instead, the discussion is structured around key themes.<sup>3</sup> For organizational purposes, the narrative is structured under four broad headings; however, conceptually, the subjects overlap and interrelate.

The first theme addresses the importance of gender identity as a springboard for women's activism, explaining that feminist unionists revised traditional ideas of unionism based on analyses of "woman's" experience. Feminist unionists' political alliance with the women's movement also broadened and reconceptualized labour movement politics and labour reform ideology. Union women's involvement in organizing the unorganized is the second theme, and further demonstrates how gendering alters notions about who to organize and what organizational strategies to use, especially for workers in feminized occupations. Equity organizing is the third focus of discussion, demonstrating concretely how the equity agenda has operated to challenge internal union democracy by promoting new leadership and alternative democratic structures of representation. The final and fourth theme addresses labour internationalism, explaining the importance of global women's organizing on international union politics and global policy debates.

### **Women's Organizing: Gender Identity, Political Vision, and Coalition Building**

Feminist analyses of women's labour organizing since the late 1960s show that feminist union activists actually initiated many revitalization strategies touted as new or innovative by renewal scholars. One strategy that can definitely be attributed to women's early organizing is coalition building. As the following narrative illustrates, building political power through alliances with groups outside labour circles that are committed to an ideology opposing patriarchal capitalism describes the historic trajectory of labour women's organizing. Yet, in the renewal literature, forming political and community coalitions with non-labour groups is regarded as a fairly recent innovation of labour movements. Reviews of union renewal refer to the importance of building coalitions with the non-labour community, including grassroots or community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in the environmental, women's, and human rights movements (e.g., Milkman and Voss 2004; Voss and Sherman 2003). Kumar and Schenk (2006, 40) point out that "coalition-building is regarded as one of the most innovative strategies for union revitalization" and that links need to be drawn between "trade unions and other non-labour institutions in civil society." Others remark that, "in theory, unions might be able to increase their institutional power by accessing the power of social movements in civil society through building coalitions with these groups and therefore coalition building is our fifth union [revitalization] strategy" (Frege

and Kelly 2004, 35). Further, renewal scholars point to the need to develop a “broad reform vision” or “strategic focus,” in conjunction with political alliances, in order to build an effective social movement (e.g., Turner 2004, 2). The argument made here is that links with the women’s movement by feminist trade unionists have influenced labour movements for many years; coalitions with women’s movement groups, many of them grassroots organizations, built capacity for mobilization, expanded the constituency of labour organizing, reframed debates on union goals and unionism, and inspired visioning for social change. Out of this activism grew a broader trade union purpose, pushing labour in the direction of social movement unionism.

In Canada, women’s union organizing, similar to what occurred in many other industrialized countries, first began during the second wave of the women’s movement. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, union women responded to a dominant male leadership and masculine union culture by devising their own ways of organizing. In these early years of feminist unionism, mobilization revolved around promoting women as agents of political action within the labour movement. As more women entered the labour market and joined unions, particularly in the newly organized public sector of the 1970s, women struggled to define “women’s issues,” those that primarily advanced gender-specific equality. Union women initially focused their efforts on a woman-centred strategy that sought to eradicate union and labour market barriers preventing them from achieving equality with men. Through engagement with women’s movement organizations, many women labour activists developed a feminist ideology and feminist praxis. Participation in consciousness raising groups radically altered the perception of women as an oppressed group in society, furthering their capacity to engage in collective struggle.<sup>4</sup> Consciousness raising legitimated women’s subjective knowledge of their social experience and transformed their consciousness about the hegemony of male power in social relations. Identifying and defining sexual harassment in the workplace, for instance, was an outcome of consciousness raising (MacKinnon 1979).

By the 1980s, the involvement of labour women in women’s movement organizations influenced how female labour activists thought about unions as organizations, and the role of labour in movement building. Feminist unionists participated in alliances with non-labour groups that adopted radical left political ideologies. For example, the International Women’s Day Committee in the city of Toronto, a grassroots socialist feminist organization, argued that “capitalism must be fundamentally altered to achieve the liberation of women, that patriarchy and capitalism are interwoven, that mass action is necessary to win gains from the state, and that [we] need to make alliances with other progressive forces, particularly with the trade union movement, if [we are] to achieve [our] goals” (Egan 1987, 114-15).

Within feminist unionist circles it was increasingly understood that labour alliances with outside groups was a necessary strategy to challenging unequal power relations under capitalism (Connelly and Keddy 1989, 28-29). Over time, numerous coalitions in Canada of labour and women's organizations were developed on issues such as child care, abortion, free trade, welfare state entitlements, and employment standards legislation.<sup>5</sup>

Coalitions of organized labour and feminist groups were especially significant in the struggle for pay equity. In the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, in large industrialized economies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and those in Western Europe, women's groups engaged in widespread political action, demanding policy reforms to raise women's wages (e.g., Acker 1989; Burton 1991; Evans and Nelson 1989; Fudge and McDermott 1991; Gregory, Hegewisch, and Sales 1999; Lewis 1988). In the fight for pay equity in the United States, for example, trade unions joined with feminists in community-based coalitions in dozens of states across the country (e.g., Blum 1991; McCann 1994). The labour-feminist alliance (Cuneo 1990) demanding fair wages for women contributed enormously to the development of "new gender politics" within labour movements (Hallock 2001, 152). Because the pay equity process required systematic job comparison measuring the relative value of paid work performed by women in relation to men, unions were sensitized to the gender power imbalance experienced by women on a daily basis in the workplace. Pay equity analyses demonstrated how women are "differently" situated in the labour market. Job comparison showed the prevalence of a generic male standard (e.g., the "normal worker" modelled on a full-time, white, able-bodied, heterosexual breadwinner) as the benchmark against which the worth of women and other minority groups work contributions are judged (Acker 1990; Creese 1999; Steinberg 1992).

As labour began to seriously confront employers about their power to define the value of work performed by women, unions inevitably began to be challenged on their own gender labour practices (e.g., Acker 1989, 22). Pay equity provided the political space for union women to push forward on equity demands both in the area of labour market policy and in regard to internal union policy, especially concerning leadership and the gender-biased culture within labour movements.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the pay equity struggle of the 1980s and 1990s marked an important turning point in transforming the gender power dynamic within labour movements, and it still remains a powerful strategic force for equity mobilization. That pay equity is regarded as a human right demonstrates the success of feminist equity organizing.<sup>7</sup>

On a strategic level, the labour movement learned that alliances with the women's movement could be an important tactical move for building mass support for labour issues. As Judy Darcy, a high-profile Canadian trade union leader points out, "It was the alliance with the women's movement that

showed the first organizational commitment of the labour movement to social unionism. We were able to build recognition in the labour movement that women are a major ally. During the Eaton's [department store] strike, there was a rallying cry around women's issues. The Fleck [auto parts manufacturing] strike, too, was an important landmark, where people in the labour movement came to understand that there was another movement out there that could be an ally" (cited in Rebeck 2005, 99). Strikes and organizing campaigns that were supported by women's movement organizations educated the labour movement and the wider public about the plight of women's work lives, especially the problem of systemic sexism observable in issues such as maternity leave, sexual harassment, and unequal pay for women (e.g., Briskin and Yanz 1983; Egan and Yanz 1983; Ritchie 1987, 76-78; White 1990).

From the beginning of women's organizing, then, conventional conceptions of a union issue, and *unionism*, were being questioned and redefined by feminist unionists. Women labour activists' direct involvement in the women's movement helped shape an alternative perspective of unionism. Links with the women's movement demonstrated that fighting for economic and social equality required more than engaging in struggle at the point of production (e.g., in the workplace), and that to broaden the base of labour activism it was necessary to move beyond the usual economic demands commonly associated with collective bargaining, to incorporate issues related to the social needs of all citizens. Feminist activists' demands steered unions away from a narrowly defined focus on bread-and-butter issues, the domain of conventional business unionism, to matters of family and sexuality and other issues within the sphere of women's movement politics. This was the beginning of gendering labour movements, as the concerns of women contrasted sharply with male interests, moving unions away from the long-established labour-management industrial relations bargaining framework (e.g., for improved wages and benefits) and toward innovative approaches to unionism and alternative models of organizing.

### **Organizing the Unorganized: Women Workers**

As labour movements experienced union decline around the globe, renewal scholars queried whether there has been a change in unions' strategy and commitment to membership recruitment (e.g., Heery and Adler 2004). It is often observed that a shift occurred, usually thought to have started in the mid-1980s and continuing into the 1990s, toward a more aggressive stance on organizing new constituencies of workers (Behrens, Hamann, and Hurd 2004, 21; Kumar and Murray 2003, 207; Kumar and Schenk 2006, 37-39; Yates 2006a, 230). As Fairbrother and Yates (2003, 17) note, before the 1980s, "unions paid little strategic attention to, and invested few resources in, actively organizing the unorganized. Even in the United States, where

membership decline was evident in the 1960s, much earlier than in the other [Anglo-American] countries, organizing was not a priority." Renewal strategists often suggest that women, who are predominantly employed in flexible, low-wage, and insecure jobs, increasingly typify the so-called model worker in the service-based economy and should be singled out for recruitment.

Although it is true that greater emphasis and additional resources have been dedicated to organizing in recent years, it is also important to recognize the historic continuities regarding *strategic* approaches to organizing the unorganized. Women have long been the target of unionization and new organizational methods. Many of the so-called innovative organizing models were created by feminist unionists as early as the 1960s and 1970s to appeal to a feminized workforce (e.g., Baker 1993; Ledwith and Colgan 2002; Tait 2005; Warskett 2004). Contrary to the views of many renewal scholars, labour women have significantly influenced recent trade union strategy. In Australia, Britain, Canada, and Sweden, as Howell and Mahon (1996, 500) explain, "strategies for renewal have often been influenced by modes of action, forms of organization, mechanisms of representation and communication and types of discourse that were originally developed with women wage earners in mind."

In the area of organizing the unorganized, women unionists made great strides in refashioning traditional organizing approaches to appeal to women workers. Unlike traditional union organizing, union campaigns were led by women and informed by feminist organizing principles. Women's groups focused on community identity, such as women's identity as service workers, to create solidarity and commitment to collective action. Women's organizing also recognized the social value of paid and unpaid reproductive labour, broadening the direction of labour campaigns. Connections were made between the devaluation of women's work in the home and the social construction of low-wage feminine or reproductive work, such as caring and personal service work, in the labour market. Women labour activists reached out to non-union women in these sex-typed occupations, forging alliances with grassroots local communities to organize and build movement support. Some examples from Canada and the United States show how early efforts to unionize working women fostered innovative organizing models, forerunners of sorts to alternative organizing strategies that were to emerge later in labour movements.

Many new and independent women's organizational structures emerged in the 1970s because of a lack of support for feminism within labour movements. In Canada, feminist women who supported labour struggle and wished to unionize women formed their own women-centred structures to overcome the obstacles they experienced from organized labour. In 1972 the Service, Office, and Retail Workers of Canada (SORWUC), a self-described

“grassroots, feminist union” (Lowe 1980, 32), was formed by women labour activists to unionize workers in service sectors where women predominate. Despite a weak commitment by the Canadian labour movement to SORWUC, the union was able to certify a respectable number of bargaining units in the banking industry.<sup>8</sup> Other feminist groups with strong ties to the Canadian women’s movement included the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) and Organized Working Women (OWW). The AUCE successfully organized support staff at the University of British Columbia, bargaining a collective agreement in 1973 with “feminist stuff” such as a “personal clause about not having to run errands and make coffee” (Jean Rands, cited in Rebeck 2005, 89). The OWW, established to promote women’s issues in the labour movement, was instrumental in supporting a women’s committee in the Ontario Federation of Labour, the first women-only committee to be formed in a labour central in Canada.<sup>9</sup>

In the United States, one of the better-known women-centred organizing models initiated in the 1970s was the 9to5 association. The organizing work of this association was groundbreaking in that it was one of the first to systematically direct its mobilizing efforts to the large, feminized, non-union, clerical workforce. The original aim of the association was not unionization *per se*, but creating group solidarity through community-based actions raising awareness of clericals’ unfair pay and working conditions. By the end of the 1970s, 9to5 formed National District 925, in alliance with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), to function nationwide as a union local “for women and by women.” The association experimented with alternative organizing approaches, such as opening a workers’ centre in Cincinnati to “test out the possibilities of city-wide sectoral organizing of clerical workers. From the union’s perspective, it was to be a new way to get into the workplace, not to target particular employers, but to aim to unionize 1 percent of all clerical workers in Cincinnati, then 10 percent, then 30 percent” (Lipsig-Mumme 1999, 15). By seeing itself as an extension of the community and rethinking the role of the union (and union membership) as the sole mechanism for organizing, National District 925 successfully organized thousands of librarians; college and university support staff; and daycare, home health care, and other government workers across the United States.<sup>10</sup>

As these few case examples demonstrate, the traditional (post-Second World War) model of unionism started to be redefined and challenged by women’s organizing as early as the 1970s. The very fact that women led campaigns organizing feminized service occupations, using their own unique organizing strategies involving feminist methods such as consciousness raising and non-hierarchical approaches to decision making, was a major, if not radical, shift from the traditional masculine approach of unionizing

industrial male workers en masse in large factory settings. Feminist unionists were taking important steps toward gendering organizing strategy by altering the culture and objectives of labour struggle. Instead of a total emphasis on expanding the membership base, women's organizing concentrated on mobilizing women workers to undertake collective action, to reform their gender consciousness, and to bring them into a labour community focused not just on workplace issues but also on social movement change.

### **Women and Equity Organizing: Building Social Unionism**

In the union renewal literature, the importance of rebuilding unions and labour movements by developing new strategies and organizational approaches to engage the participation of the general union membership is understood as a key reform for labour revitalization. Arguments are made about fostering greater internal democracy and vitality within labour movements through developing new approaches for involving union members in labour movement activism (e.g., Behrens, Hamann, and Hurd 2004, 22; Kumar and Murray 2003, 208; Schenk 2003, 248-50). Promoting rank-and-file involvement in union decision making, creating avenues for inclusive participation of minority or equity groups and advancing their leadership in the union hierarchy, as well as in union organizing campaigns, are recommended strategies for renewal offered in the literature (e.g., Milkman and Voss 2004; Sharpe 2004; Weir 2006; Yates 2006a).

However, it is not sufficiently recognized in this discussion that feminist union activists and feminist scholars have made these arguments before (e.g., Briskin 2002; Briskin and Yanz 1983; Colgan and Ledwith 2000; Darcy 1993; Ledwith and Colgan 2002; White 1990). In fact, considerable discussion and debate over the benefits and pitfalls for union democracy of creating alternative structures of representation, such as women's committees and caucuses, have permeated feminist discussions on women and unions. Although the debates are too involved to discuss here, it is often agreed (with the exception of Sweden – see Briskin and Eliasson 1999a) that women's committees and other equity structures of representation have gone a long way toward transforming the culture of labour organizations, especially on issues of gender discrimination and leadership, and have oriented labour movement goals toward social movement unionism. As I explain below, equity organizing, both historically and into the present, lies at the heart of women's labour activism and remains a key element of the equity agenda in unions.

Starting as early as the 1970s, labour women in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, as well as in some European nations, formed women-only committees and reform caucuses where women could meet in a non-sexist culture to discuss concerns specific to women (e.g.,

Beccalli 1996; Beccalli and Meardi 2002; Briskin 1994, 1999, 2002; Colgan and Ledwith 2000, 2002; Franzway 2000b; Hunt 2002; Parker and Gruelle 1999; Tait 2005). Often referred to as separate organizing, these groups were structured in non-hierarchical and less bureaucratic ways to encourage women's participation and were a deliberate attempt to level power relations in unions so as to promote inclusive and collective decision making. In Canada, women's committees were instrumental in creating anti-discrimination policy prohibiting sexist and other discriminatory behaviour in union meetings.<sup>11</sup> Separate organizing raised awareness about union priorities that ignored and disempowered women, generating feminist response that promoted women into leadership roles. As one former member of Saskatchewan Working Women (SWW), a women's committee formed in the 1970s in that Canadian province, explains, "Women got confidence from each other. As a result, the future president of the SFL (Saskatchewan Federation of Labour) came up through SWW. The head of the Saskatchewan Government Employees' Union came from SWW, as did the chairperson of the Labour Relations Board. Nearly all the women staff reps in unions came from SWW" (S. Roberts, cited in Rebick 2005, 92). By the early 1980s, as a result of separate organizing, union women in Canada demanded and were successful in attaining affirmative action positions on the executives of central labour bodies (White 1993). Separate organizing proved to have far-ranging impact not only in challenging the masculine culture of unions but also in contesting the overall direction of labour movement goals. More than any other aspect of women's union activism, separate organizing provided the foundational bedrock for developing a gender and equity perspective of trade unionism (e.g., Briskin 2002; Hunt 2002; Ledwith and Colgan 2002; Sugiman 1994).

Women's union activism generated new approaches and perspectives about whom to organize. Community coalitions, especially with women's organizations, led to growing awareness of the need to take into account *differing* experiences among women and other minorities. Gender-specific labour demands that were first put forward based on a conception of a universal women's identity started to be re-evaluated in response to views of minority women whose experiences differed from the core constituency of white and typically middle-class women. The experience of racialized women in consciousness raising groups, for example, exposed different forms of oppression among women.<sup>12</sup> Although feminists had previously critiqued a universal male standard as unfair to women, now minority women began to criticize essentialist notions of universal womanhood. Within labour movements, recognition of diversity led to alternative equality strategies, not only for women but for all minorities. New constituencies such as racialized minorities, gays and lesbians, the disabled, and other marginalized union members sought political recognition and structures of representation similar to those



that women had originally pursued inside labour movements (Briskin 1999, 551). Sexual minorities in Canada especially benefit from the organizing work of women who paved the way for gays and lesbians to form caucuses, thereby opening space to debate and propose policy initiatives challenging unions on issues of sexual orientation discrimination (Hunt 2002, 272).

Racialized constituencies, too, built upon the feminist challenge to rid labour movements and labour markets of systemic racism (Briskin 2002, 38; Clarke Walker, this volume; Das Gupta 2007, 192-93; Leah 1999, 114).<sup>13</sup> As equity-seeking groups continued to organize, affirmative action-designated seats were extended to racial minorities on central labour bodies in Canada by the early 1990s, and later in the same decade, for the disabled, gays and lesbians, and Aboriginals. Recently, Aboriginal organizing in Canada has begun to flourish. In some unions, collective agreement language to protect Aboriginal culture is being devised, alternative approaches to unionizing specific to Aboriginal communities are being developed, and employment equity plans are being formulated to better represent Aboriginals in the workforce (Moran 2005; Page 2005).

That women's organizing contributed to building and diversifying the constituency base of labour movements is not unique to Canada. As Hunt (2002, 273) observes about sexual diversity, "The Canadian experience has some parallels in countries such as Australia, Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent the United States ... [in that] early union activity has tended to follow progress on women's issues." In the United Kingdom, as Ledwith and Colgan (2002, 16) explain, "the Trades Union Congress has moved from running a women's conference, since 1925, to organizing a black members' conference and a lesbian and gay workers' conference in the 1990s. In 2000 it established a conference for disabled members."

Building equity constituencies also created a vehicle for reaching out to communities outside labour to engage in collective struggle for social and economic justice. In recent years, in the United States and Canada, unions have established coalitions with community-based groups such as those allied with immigrant and migrant labour communities, to press for better and more inclusive labour protections. These coalitions expanded the reach of organized labour to encompass groups difficult to organize (precarious workers) or the unorganizable (migrant workers), and encouraged labour organizations to engage in cross-border and international labour resistance strategies. In Canada, the Philippine Women Centre of BC follows feminist ideas to organize live-in migrant domestic caregivers on their employment rights by working with labour and establishing community-based programs and projects that empower Filipina-Canadian women (see Zaman, Diocson, and Scott 2007). The Toronto and York Region Labour Council, based in the city of Toronto, engages in municipal campaigns aimed at supporting immigrant workers, many of whom are low-paid women working in the

### **Gendering Labour: Toward an Equity Model of Unionism**

As a result of women's organizing, the labour movement in Canada and elsewhere experienced decisive challenges to traditional unionism. These feminist challenges and reform efforts correspond to those that renewal scholars recommend. However, as the above review points out, the renewal scholarship tends to neglect the fact that, often, progressive change occurred whenever a gender lens and equity focus was brought to bear on the issues, structures, practices, and culture of labour organizations. As we have seen, the woman-centred strategy to eliminate sexism in unions evolved and expanded to a broader union equity base, generating a stronger commitment to social justice in labour movements. Various forms of feminist union activism, from advancing new constituencies into the union fold through encouraging greater rank-and-file participation, to mobilizing both union and non-union workers in coalitions with grassroots community groups, to developing an equity agenda to improve the situation of the marginalized inside, and outside, the labour movement, contributed to a coherent labour strategy to further economic and social justice. An equity agenda encompassing support for gender, racialized, and other minority group equality eventually extended equity issues to international labour and human rights, sustainable development, and global solidarity.

Women's organizing imparted to labour movement culture a gender politic – a discourse that incorporates recognition of difference and strives for substantive equality outcomes for women and other equity-seeking groups. For instance, as feminist unionists struggled to achieve greater union representation for women, it became evident that the industrial model of unionism in Canada and the United States is structured to secure unionization in male-predominant industries, thus neglecting the plight of precarious workers in many feminized sectors (e.g., Forrest 1995; Warskett 1996).

In the struggle for pay equity, gender biases in the workplace were uncovered, exposing a masculine ideal of the generic worker that serves as an implicit reference point for defining work standards. The struggle for recognition of women's unpaid work in the home caused a decisive shift in thinking about "women's work" that altered perceptions about the social value of women's paid and unpaid employment in the economy and led to mobilization around specific policy demands (e.g., pay equity, UN policy). Issues on child care, reproductive choice, and balancing the workday between home and work are now seen as key labour concerns (e.g., Beccalli 1996; Briskin 2002, 33; 2006).

Union women continuously work to genderize employment and welfare policy to be fairer to working women, thereby politicizing and gendering the meaning of welfare entitlements (e.g., Cobble 2004; Porter 2003). Although initially the basis of women's inequality was understood in relation to structural issues such as women's unequal earnings compared with those

private service sector, for example, in hospitality, garment, clerical, and health care sectors.

The council has launched campaigns to raise the economic and work standards for these low-paid workers by demanding an increase in the minimum wage to ten dollars per hour; by supporting mass mobilization and unionization with the goal of raising union density in the Greater Toronto Area by 1 percent; and by lobbying municipal, provincial, and federal politicians to improve social services (Toronto and York Region Labour Council 2005). STITCH, a US-based labour advocacy organization, builds links with the American labour and women's movements to forge international solidarity, and specifically engages in cross-border education and union actions with women activists in Central America.<sup>14</sup> Strategies such as these may reasonably be conceived of as a logical outgrowth of the feminist unionist equity agenda to achieve greater social equality for the marginalized, establishing the strategic capacity for social movement unionism.

### **Labour Internationalism**

A fourth subject in the trade union renewal scholarship concerns the issue of international unionism and global labour solidarity (e.g., Harrod and O'Brien 2002; Munck 2002; Turner 2004). However, as Fairbrother and Hammer (2005, 406) point out, "Surprisingly, there has been relatively little discussion of international unionism in the debates about trade union renewal or revitalization." Given the relative lack of interest in labour internationalism, it is not surprising to see almost no discussion of global labour women's organizing, even though the work of international trade union women, and other women labour activists, has shaped policy discussions on matters of international trade, development policy, and international labour standards.

International women's groups began to systematically organize in the 1980s when structural adjustment policy, implemented by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, severely altered the conditions of life for women (Antrobus 2004, 67). Women's groups caucused, networked, organized coalitions, and formed alliances with NGOs to debate strategy and formulate gendered analyses of women's socio-economic position within the global economy. Such analyses highlighted how women are super-exploited in the sphere of production, through export-led development in manufacturing that depends on low-wage, young, female, and flexible labour. In services, women are hired to perform exceedingly routinized (e.g., data and teleprocessing) work and experience extreme forms of oppression in personal service (e.g., domestic, sex trade) work. Transnational women's groups also pointed to the impact of neo-liberal development policy on the sphere of reproduction, showing that reductions in the delivery of state-funded social services such as education, health care, and general welfare

programs harm the economic and social well-being of families and households (Petchesky 2003). A large part of the struggle for women's equality has been to insist that governments recognize women's unpaid labour in the household. United Nations conferences on women devoted discussion to this issue, resulting in member governments signing agreements in 1975 and 1985 to redress problems related to the devaluation of women's unpaid domestic work. However, by 1995, at the Beijing NGO conference, women from all 185 participating countries reported a decline in the position of women in their countries and noted that women's unpaid contributions had increased while policies and services designed to support them had, in almost all countries, been reduced or eliminated (Luxton 2005, 8).

These gendered analyses established the strategic groundwork for further global organizing. When the World Trade Organization (WTO) was launched in 1995, it became a focal point for women's organizing, particularly feminist labour organizing.<sup>15</sup> In 1996, when the WTO met to debate a proposal for a social clause, women's groups asked what "a social clause would mean for women and what its significance is in an overall campaign for workers rights" (Hale 1998, 28). This was the first time international attention focused on the specific gender impact of global free trade.

The organizing work of feminists also influenced the policy perspective of the international labour community, especially of global unions, such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).<sup>16</sup> The ICFTU Women's Committee has repeatedly argued for the "inclusion of gender perspectives in all trade union policies and programmes" (ICFTU 2003, 13). It devised an ICFTU Charter of Rights of Working Women and has called for including women workers' rights in the policies of the WTO, World Bank, and regional trade agreements, as well as demanded that the policies of international agencies be assessed from a gender dimension. The ICFTU has asked affiliates to intensify efforts to target organizing women (who represent 80 percent of workers) in the export processing zones; to organize women, as well as youth, in precarious employment; and to protect the rights of migrant workers.

Inserting a gender lens in policy discussions on global development re-defined the debates on important issues such as trade liberalization and global labour regulation. International women trade unionists, in alliance with the global women's movement, identified women as central actors in the global economy who, as highly exploited workers in the formal and informal economies, need protection from trade unions, as well as support from global institutions whose policies directly impact on the women's work and day-to-day lives. As in other areas of feminist union activism, alliances and coalitions with global women's movement organizations have proven to be a crucial strategy in the struggle to advocate for gender and social equality worldwide.

of men, or to an unequal gender division of labour that reinforced women's subordinate status in the workplace, in the union, and in the home, over time, the study and meaning of gender relations broadened to encompass the social processes and cultural value systems that lie behind inequities experienced by women and other equity-seeking groups in unions and within society.

Gendering facilitated a transformative labour strategy along two dimensions. First, by internally challenging trade union organizations, largely, though not exclusively, in relation to equity demands, traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic structures and conceptions of unionism were reformulated and re-envisioned. Feminist unionists' alliance with the women's movement broadened the labour agenda to incorporate gender equality and other social equity demands, enlarging and transforming the very basis of labour struggle. The meaning of a legitimate labour issue was transformed by challenging the masculine culture of unions and labour markets (e.g., the male breadwinner ideal), identifying the intersection between productive and reproductive labour (e.g., child care, work/life balance, parental and family leave), resisting low-wage feminized service work (e.g., precarious employment, gender wage equity, sex work), promoting human rights (e.g., international labour regulation, pay equity movements, same sex rights), and by international solidarity (e.g., women and global trade union issues).

Second, by opposing systemic inequities inherent in labour organizations, labour markets, and within society generally, women's activism moved labour in a direction of social justice unionism. Feminist unionism necessarily confronts fundamental gender power relations, driving labour in the direction of broader social change projects. Flowing from women's organizing is a type of equity model of unionism that promotes a transformative politics within labour movements.

## **Conclusion**

How gender is incorporated into the union revitalization project was the central problematic of this chapter. The decades of struggle over the implementation of a feminist labour agenda is barely acknowledged in much of the union renewal literature, and therefore the successes and limitations of these past organizing efforts are not analyzed or integrated into this literature. It is worth emphasizing that women's labour organizing since the 1970s can be broadly described as encompassing the following internal and external movement strategies, all of which are frequently cited in renewal scholarship: coalition building (alliances with women's movement organizations and grassroots community groups), organizing the unorganized (e.g., non-union clerical and other service workers), political action campaigns (e.g., pay equity), inclusive democratic practices promoting greater membership participation (e.g., separate organizing of equity groups), diversifying labour

leadership (e.g., increasing the presence of women and minorities), and labour internationalism and promoting an alternative vision of social change (e.g., feminist ideology and practice). All of these strategies contributed to a broader conception of unionism, altering how unions conceived of themselves and how they structured their organizations. An equality-driven framework, first introduced by union women during second-wave feminism, channelled labour struggle toward a transformative political program internally within the trade union movement, and externally as part of a larger social movement confronting globalization. Women's union organizing initiatives promote labour organizing as a social movement through its wide-ranging political program to further economic and social justice.

That the organizing work of women continues to have validity for the renewal project is emphasized by Christopher Schenk (2003, 253), who reminds us of "the need to support people's various identities as feminists, environmentalists, or members of a particular ethnic community and concomitantly to create the necessary unity to defend their needs and aspirations as workers." I obviously agree with Schenk that labour in Canada, and in other national contexts, must continue to represent and advocate for the needs and interests of feminists and equity groups, as well as of other social movement activists. But I would also point out that this has been an ongoing struggle that needs to be given full consideration in evaluating tactics and practices of union renewal. Equity organizing is seldom addressed as a coherent strategy for labour movement change, but rather it is understood as one factor among many for revitalizing unions. Simply inserting women and equity-seeking groups into the existing union structures without understanding that the equity project is part of a larger gender politic to transform labour as a social movement will not alter the policies and practices of trade unions.

Indeed, one of the implications of assessing feminist labour organizing as a renewal strategy is that change does not come easily in labour movements (Clarke Walker; Edelson; Foley, Chapter 7; Wall; this volume). The recent history of women's organizing in unions shows that gendered inequality and other inequality regimes are so fundamental and deeply rooted in labour organizations that change strategies must be continuously revised and adjusted to confront new barriers and shifting economic and social realities. Still, in the current era of labour struggle, where unions are losing ground as a force of political opposition to capital, women's organizing continues to hold out possibilities for labour movement change and needs to be considered in debates on the future of unions.

#### **Notes**

- 1 In this chapter the terms "women's organizing," "women's labour activism," "feminist unionism," "feminist unionist activism," "feminist trade unionism," and "women's organizing" refer to organizing initiatives and actions informed by feminist principles and feminist politics. For a discussion of feminism in unions see Colgan and Ledwith (2000).

- 2 The Canadian Labour Congress' report (1997) *Women's Work* uses the terms "equity" and "equality agenda." For a theoretical discussion of equity agenda and equity project see Linda Briskin (1994, 2002).
- 3 For a longer discussion of the literature see my working paper (2006) *Gendering Union Renewal: Women's Contributions to Labour Movement Revitalization*. For the Gender and Work Database, see <http://www.genderwork.ca>.
- 4 Consciousness raising was highly influential in feminist theorizing and feminist action, especially on questions of women's domestic labour and sexuality. See Beccalli (1996), MacKinnon (1989), and Rebeck (2005, 12).
- 5 The Equal Pay Coalition advocated for legislated pay equity in the province of Ontario; the Childcare Advocacy Association of Canada continues its struggle for a federally funded national child care program for regulated child care centres; Women Against the Budget advocates for an alternative budget policy supporting a broad set of social programs beneficial to women and other vulnerable groups; Women Against Trade in the Pro-Canada Network mobilized an anti-free-trade campaign in the 1980s against greater trade liberalization with the United States.
- 6 Since the 1980s almost every dimension of labour market policy, from occupational health and safety to job training, apprenticeships, and employment standards, has been subject to a gender-sensitive analysis. On Canadian policy issues see, for example, Cohen (2003), Fudge (1991), and Porter (2003).
- 7 Historic continuities on the pay equity struggle are evident in Canada. In the province of Quebec, the right to equal pay for work of equal value first began with legislation in 1976, continuing into the 1980s and 1990s. In 1996, the women's and union movement won a proactive pay equity law – achieved, in part, by the 1995 Bread and Roses March; see Beeman (2004). On pay equity as a human right see the Canadian federal *Pay Equity Task Force 2004* (Canada, 2004), 7.
- 8 Eventually, limited resources and a legal decision restricting certification (unionized) units to small bank branches undermined the momentum of the campaign and the union was unable to continue its organizing efforts. See, for example, Baker (1993) and Warskett (1991).
- 9 The Ontario Federation of Labour formed the first women's committee in a labour central in Canada in 1961. On the formation of women's committees in Canada see White (1993, chapter 5).
- 10 In 2001, National District 925 restructured, merging with various other locals within SEIU. However, 9to5 continues to exist and organize, with a national office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, focusing on campaigns such as family leave, sexual harassment and anti-discrimination, workfare and non-standard work; see <http://www.9to5.org/>.
- 11 In Canada, the women's committee in the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union devised anti-discrimination language in 1988 that is still used today. Interview, Peggy Nash, CAW, 31 October 2003, Toronto, Ontario.
- 12 Consciousness raising in the 1970s alienated many racialized women living in Canada whose experiences as immigrants and racialized minorities did not match those of white middle-class women, who tended to dominate these groups; see Agnew (1996, 76-82).
- 13 In the United States, the history of racial minority unionization began much earlier than in other national contexts, including that of Canada; see Tait (2005).
- 14 [www.stitchonline.org/whowhat.asp](http://www.stitchonline.org/whowhat.asp).
- 15 Numerous feminist organizations and networks were developed to address the issue of gender and trade; see Antrobus (2004, 90) and Hale (1998, 17).
- 16 The ICFTU has a membership of 45 million workers, 40 percent of whom are women; see Fairbrother and Hammer (2005).

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