

DEMOCRACY ON THE LINE: REFLECTIONS ON GENDER AND THE CUPE STRIKE

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When the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903 walked off the job on October 26, 2000, union members did not know that this strike would ultimately break the record for the longest work stoppage ever held at a Canadian university. However, the local—which represents graduate assistants, contract faculty and teaching assistants at York University in Toronto—did know one thing: the members had to strike to win. Winning meant establishing, maintaining, and expanding gains for all of the 2,100 workers that comprise the three bargaining units. Because the local had to negotiate three different collective agreements, the issues at stake were wide-ranging. Unit 3, which represents the graduate assistants, was newly established; therefore, it was imperative for this unit to secure a fair first deal. Contract faculty, represented by Unit 2, sought to protect two programs that provide the sessional lecturers with a modicum of job security, but that the employer wanted to claw back or eliminate. For Unit 1, which represents teaching assistants, the central issue was to protect the tuition indexation clause¹ which had been won in the previous round of bargaining. When CUPE 3903 concluded the strike 78 days later, the local was clearly

¹ Tuition indexation ties teaching assistants' wages to the tuition they pay. It is a system that prevents wages from being eroded by increases in tuition. It recognizes that teaching assistants are not only university workers, but university students as well. This system was pioneered by CUPE 3903.

victorious because it had won the language that it had fought so hard to achieve. Indeed, the members had struck and won.

One effect of this highly successful strike is that it has motivated other unions to sharpen their efforts in organizing for accessible education. For example, shortly after the York University victory, Carleton University was able to win partial tuition indexation for its teaching assistants. Since then, other unions have been looking to 3903 for lessons in how to wage a successful and democratic strike. As a result, it is common to hear members of CUPE 3903 lauding the local as a model of democracy from which other unions can learn. In many ways, it is true that CUPE 3903 has been exemplary in its ability to implement measures that enhanced grassroots democracy. For example, during the 7strike, the local experimented with many creative ways of facilitating participatory decision-making. Daily Strike Committee meetings were held for immediate logistical planning, and regular General Membership Meetings (GMMs) were held for long-term strategizing and discussion between the rank and file and members of the bargaining team. Participation was facilitated by providing alternative duties and flexible time arrangements for those who could not picket (or picket full time) due to childcare responsibilities or physical disabilities.

Despite these efforts, the goal of waging a strike that was truly democratic fell short of the mark. It is our contention that because the strike was underpinned by some problematic gendered assumptions, the potential for full and democratic participation by all members was compromised. In other words, the ways in which the strike was gendered undermined the local's very claims to democracy. We make this assertion not only as feminists and political scientists-in-

training, but also as union members who walked the picket line daily throughout the strike. In this paper, we discuss three strike moments to illustrate the gendered nature of our union's democratic practices: the division of labour on the picket line and in the union headquarters; the rhetorical strategies used to construct the notions of "worker" and "militancy" through time use; and the problems that inhered in the local's use of decentralized decision-making processes during this strike. Our work uses a combination of feminist methodologies, including borrowing from our own experiences and observations on the picket line, highlighting interviews conducted with other CUPE members, and using traditional academic textual research. We want to emphasize that both of us were motivated to write this critical piece precisely because we were proud to have been a part of this important struggle. We believe that internal critique can help strengthen CUPE 3903 and its democratic process, and this article is one way of facilitating that.

On Foraging And Photocopying: The Gendered Division Of Labour

Picketing the main campus of York University presented many challenges, but striking CUPE members benefited from the fact that the campus (located on the outer edges of Toronto) is marked by clear boundaries, unlike other downtown universities whose boundaries blur with those of the city.² As such, there are only seven entrances by which cars can access the main campus; each of those entrances

² York also has a satellite campus, Glendon, which has one entrance that was picketed.

were picketed for twelve hours a day throughout most of the strike.³ Picket lines were divided up according to discipline, with political science, anthropology, law and business students positioned on Sentinel Road, one of the larger streets leading onto campus. Each line developed its own particular culture, and in a gesture towards grassroots democracy, the lines also had a degree of autonomy to develop their own organizational structures and decision-making processes.

The Sentinel picket line was based on the division of various tasks, such as doing traffic duty, leafleting cars, being picket captain, as well as "de-escalating" conflicts that arose between drivers and picketers, and making a written record of those types of incidents. It is important to note that these formal, assigned, responsibilities were not starkly gendered, in that both male and female picketers engaged in all of the necessary tasks. In this sense, picketers seemed to transcend gendered patterns of socialization that would ascribe "feminine labour" (soup maker, incident reporter) onto the women and the "masculine labour" (picket captain, traffic duty) onto the men.

However, despite the fact that formal duties were shared equally among women and men, a closer look indicates that a gendered division of labour began to emerge on the Sentinel picket line through informal, unassigned duties. In other words, it emerged through a particular picket culture. For example, in a conversation we had with a solidarity picketer (a feminist labour law professor), the discussion quickly turned to how glaring the gendered division of

³ In the last few days of the strike, when the weather became very cold, picketing was reduced to 8 hours a day.

labour was on the line. She observed that some of the men often engaged in what appeared to be superfluous and typically "masculine" activities. It became a running joke among some Sentinel picketers that women "held down the fort" on the line while the "men folk" foraged in the bush to gather firewood, fix snow fences, and (at one point) carry a shed. It was common for men on the picket line to recruit other men for various tasks like patrolling holes in the snow fence, counting cars driving through the field, and moving large or heavy objects. It was almost exclusively men who threw themselves in front of the cars attempting to cross the picket line. When the weather grew colder and snow began to fall, it was almost always men who chopped wood and stoked the fire that burned in a barrel. Some male union members were even so industrious as to build a furnace out of an overturned barrel and some pipes. Others shoveled snow with makeshift shovels.

While some of the activities noted here certainly had their use (we did appreciate having a fire on those frigid December days), most of these activities were almost comically macho, since they frequently appeared to be more about bravado than necessity. Part of this was a troubling display of paternalism. There were countless incidents where a female union member would be handling a conflict with an aggressive driver when a male union member would intervene without being asked. This struck many of the women as being rather paternalistic because it appeared as though some men thought that any situation that involved confrontation required their assistance.

The bravado and paternalism is, in part, what led to the coding of these jobs as masculine. But they were coded as masculine jobs not just because almost exclusively men

engaged them in, but also because it was men who approached other men to help with such tasks. One of our male colleagues commented in a conversation that when he was invited to participate in these activities, he felt conflicted. While he knew that these tasks had become coded as masculine, and revealed a potentially troubling paternalism and gendered asymmetry on the picket line, he secretly felt flattered at being considered "one of the boys." That is, his masculinity was confirmed by other men who considered him capable of engaging in these tasks.

This complex relationship between male-ness and masculinity indicates how some men on the picket line engaged with masculinity in various and conflicting ways.⁴ The picket line became a space where men's own relationship to masculinity was both contested and confirmed. One of the authors is uncomfortable with the concept of "performing" masculinity because this seems to indicate an intentional masculine behaviour.⁵ However, in this case, the notion of performing masculinity can be useful in that it underscores the shifting nature of masculine practices. Specifically, the men engaged in the behaviours

⁴ Among feminist and queer theorists, there has recently been a growing interest in theories of masculinity that emphasize its shifting status and men's complex engagement with masculinity's hegemonic forms. See, for example, Faludi, Susan, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1999, and, Halberstam, J., *Female Masculinity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.

⁵ The notion of performance or 'performativity' has been most famously pioneered by Judith Butler, and has been importantly elaborated by feminist theorists like Shannon Bell. See: Butler, J., *Gender Trouble*, New York: Routledge, 1990, and *Excitable Speech*, New York/London: Routledge, 1997; Bell, S., *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

that were implicitly coded as masculine were performing one type of masculinity that they may not have performed in contexts outside of the picket line. The strike opened a space for men—and, arguably, for women—to perform masculinity in ways they may otherwise have not.

The gendered division of labour encountered on the Sentinel picket line was an even greater problem in the union office that served as the strike headquarters. During the strike, union members who were unable to picket had the option to work alternate duty in the office. According to a female office coordinator we interviewed, it was mostly persons with disabilities and women who did this alternate office work. The latter can largely be explained because childcare responsibilities fall disproportionately on women, making it difficult for them to picket regularly. The fact that it was mostly women who worked in the strike headquarters is one part of the gendered dimension of the office labour, but what is particularly important here is the way that the work was valued (or not, in this case). Compared to picketing, very little value was placed on the work that was done in the office, even though both the picketing and non-picketing labour were essential to the success of the strike. As one office coordinator reported, "I think there was a certain macho element about picketing versus doing office work. The 'real' striking is being on the picket line." One indication of the lack of value placed on the office work was that, unlike the picket lines, it was not organized prior to the strike. As the strike progressed, the office work was still not made a priority, which the office coordinator saw as having gendered implications:

There was this huge body of administrative work and clerical work that had to go on that was totally undervalued. Stuff got done, but it was not a priority. Certainly not at the beginning of the strike, but I would argue a lot throughout the strike. But just because it has no status, it was never put as a priority. It was never discussed in strike mobilization meetings. It just *is* invisible labour, because it's women's labour.

These claims about the invisibility of the feminized office labour are parallel to arguments made by feminist political economists doing research into women's paid and unpaid labour.⁶ Women's work is embedded in a sexual division of labour based on a public/private, market/family and paid/unpaid divide, and a sexually segregated labour market where women are concentrated in job ghettos. Both the sexual division of labour and the sexually segregated labour market, mean that the work that many women do is

⁶ See: Armstrong, Pat and Armstrong, Hugh, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work*, Third ed. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994. *Unpaid Work and Macroeconomics: New Discussions, New Tools for Action*. Ottawa: Status of Women Canada, 1998.; Bakker, Isabella. "Introduction: The Gendered Foundations of Restructuring in Canada." In *Rethinking Restructuring: Gender and Change in Canada*. Isabella Bakker, ed, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Brodie, Janine, *Politics on the Margins: Restructuring and the Canadian Women's Movement*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995; Bakker, I., "Holding Government to Account for their Budgets." United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). *Progress of the World's Women 2000: UNIFEM Biennial Report*. Coord. by Diane Elson, 2000.

undervalued in terms of wages, and respect.⁷ There is a clear correlation between these wider patterns of women's labour and the gendered dimensions of the way picketing/non-picketing labour was valued during the strike. Picketing was prioritized over clerical/office work, which is understood as "feminine." This de-valuation of feminine labour was evident to one office worker, who noted "I just think that [there was] status attached to certain jobs within the strike. Like, driving around in the truck is a good job. And sitting in the office, photocopying, isn't."

This lack of valuation meant the workers in the office became frustrated and felt alienated from the strike. It was reported that some CUPE members simply stopped performing alternate duty, forfeiting their strike pay and their attachment to the strike altogether. Many were said to have felt inadequate because they could not picket. An office coordinator indicated that:

People who couldn't picket were in a very difficult position and had very little sympathy. There was this idea that if you were really committed, you'd just picket. Unless you're actually in a wheelchair, you have no good reason not to picket. Unless you have some really visible disability, then you're just shirking.

⁷ See: Armstrong, P., and Armstrong, H., *The Double Ghetto*; and Luxton, Meg and Reiter, Ester, "Double, Double, Toil and Trouble ... Women's Experience of Work and Family in Canada 1980-1995", in *Women and the Canadian Welfare State: Challenges and Change*. Patricia M. Evans and Gerda R. Wekerle, eds. pp. 197-221.

This feeling of exclusion does not lend itself to union solidarity—or democracy. The problem raised here about the appropriate valuation of labour will also be considered in the next section when we examine the ways that time use was used to measure the value of members' contribution to the strike.

Picket Til You Drop: The Discourse Of Time And Militancy

In this section, we examine the relationship between the political economy of time and the language of militancy used during the strike. We argue that, through various rhetorical exchanges at meetings and on listserves, the level of a member's militancy or commitment to the strike became equated with the amount of time s/he spent on the picket line. While it may seem innocent enough to measure one's commitment by gauging how much time one devotes to something, there are significant gender dimensions to this claim.

Feminists have conducted extensive research in the area of time use,⁸ in part because the burden of unpaid labour falls disproportionately on women. The problem of time use is relevant for union politics because, as Anne Phillips notes,

⁸ Waring, Marilyn, "Work", in *Three Masquerades: Essays on Equality, Work and Hu(man) Rights*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997; Bakker, Isabella and Elson, Diane, "Towards Engendering Budgets." In *The Alternative Federal Budget Papers 1998*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 1998; Luxton, Meg, "The UN, Women and Household Labour: Measuring and Valuing Unpaid Work." *Women's Studies International Forum*. 20 no. 3 (1997), pp. 431-439; Phillips, Anne, *Engendering Democracy*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

the "failure to recognize the additional burdens on women's time" is one of the most significant barriers to women's involvement in union democracy.⁹ Phillips goes on to argue that, "Men and women have a different relationship to work, and a different relationship to time, and no version of democracy that rests its case on increased participation at work can be neutral between women and men."¹⁰ Similarly, the goal of a fully democratic strike cannot be possible without recognition of this gendered relationship to time.

One clear problem voiced by both men and women during the strike was that attendance at meetings took up a great deal of time each week (although attendance was, of course, voluntary). General Membership Meetings (GMMs) are based on principles of participatory democracy, i.e. during the strike, rank and file members were able to put forth motions and make decisions on nearly every facet of the strike. However, GMMs regularly lasted three hours or more. Many union members complained that these meetings were onerously drawn out, with the same points being repeated by the same speakers. This lack of attention to time use is in contrast to the United Nurses of Alberta, whose membership is 98% female. It has a policy that no meetings or union activities to be held on weekends, and that the meetings be limited to no longer than 1.5 hours.¹¹

This kind of gender-sensitive policy takes into account the fact that because women are typically responsible for domestic labour and child care duties, their time is limited. This is particularly relevant for contract faculty workers in

⁹ Phillips, A., *Engendering Democracy*, p. 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹¹ This is, of course, not during a strike situation, but it demonstrates recognition of the gendered nature of time use.

Unit 2, a section of the union that is demographically unique. Although there are not yet statistics to prove it,¹² it is clear from casual observation that contract faculty as a group tend to be older than graduate or teaching assistants, since most have completed or are near completing their doctoral degrees. Many in Unit 2 also have families and children, which make for increased domestic labour. Women represent a significant proportion of contract faculty as well.¹³ During the strike, concerns were raised that workers from Unit 2 failed to attend and participate in GMMs, but rarely was the relationship to time of those workers' considered as a factor.

The goal of democracy, then, fell short because in most of the public discussions about the strike and how it was conducted, there was little acknowledgment that women and men have varying demands on their time. The need for this acknowledgment is made by Linda Briskin, who writes, "I call for 'gendering union democracy' which speaks to making the internal practices of unions more democratic and welcoming, more accessible by taking account of realities such as child care and domestic responsibilities".¹⁴ Gendering union democracy requires, in other words, an acknowledgment by the executive and the membership that time use is gendered. This recognition would facilitate union

¹² The union executive is currently compiling this information.

¹³ A rough count of a list of names of Unit 2 members demonstrated that 50% of the unit is women. However, the number might very well be higher because names alone are not a sufficient indicator of gender. In cases where gender was unclear, we did not include that person in our calculation of female Unit 2 members.

¹⁴ Briskin, L., "Gendering Union Democracy." *Canadian Woman Studies*. 18, no. 1 (Spring 1998), p. 35.

democracy because it might allow for more women with unpaid labour duties to become involved, particularly if gender-sensitive policies are implemented. Considering the gendered nature of time use would involve asking, as one of the office coordinators put it, "what happens when you go home?...If you have a lot of domestic labour to do, how much time can you spend picketing? I don't think people take that seriously. There is this idea that you're supposed to commit your entire life [to picketing]. Some of us are in a position to do that, some of us aren't." The ability to commit to a strike clearly has gendered underpinnings:

Women enter unions differently than men because of their workplace locations, their household/family responsibilities, and the pervasive violence they experience in both public and private spaces. Women and men have unequal access to political and economic power, and to union power. They do not experience democracy, or the lack thereof, in the same way. Democracy, then, is neither an abstraction, nor gender neutral.¹⁵

Understanding the gendered nature of time use also facilitates an understanding of the ways in which a problematic relationship between time use and militancy developed throughout the strike. Simply put, language used in public discussions was often underpinned by the notion that the more time you put into the strike, the more militant

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

you were.¹⁶ Time use, then, was used as a gauge of commitment. This notion of militancy is problematic because of the ways the political economy of time is gendered. Because women as a group perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid labour, women as a group were disadvantaged in this notion of militancy.

To illustrate, two situations will be discussed here. The first deals with a controversy that emerged on Sentinel around the December holiday picketing schedule. It was suggested on the graduate political science student email listserve (GRAPSCI) and on the line that picketing be suspended when classes ended early in December. This was based on considerations of practicality and safety: there would not be many people entering the campus at this time, and due to holiday travel arrangements, very few people would be picketing, making the lines dangerously thin. Some members responded in a "more militant than thou" fashion, suggesting that they would picket under any conditions and for any amount of time. The underlying implication from some of these responses appeared to be that raising the question of time use—suggesting that our time might be better spent off the picket lines after a certain point—implied a lack of militancy. The language used reinforced the rhetorical construction of a committed worker as being he who has unlimited time to dedicate to the struggle. In this

¹⁶ During the strike, 'militancy' was understood as positive and crucial to our winning the strike. While we do not have space to explore it here, there are, of course, military and masculinist connotations to militancy. However, we are not challenging the fact that militancy was necessary to win; rather, we want to challenge the way that militancy was constructed in a way that may have excluded feminine dimensions.

discussion, what was originally a question of safety quickly decayed into a question of commitment.

Debate about similar issues later occurred at a GMM shortly after the holidays when the weather became very cold. We spoke to a female picketer and picket captain at Shoreham Gate who had raised a concern at this meeting. She spoke in favour of shortening the picketing shifts from four hours to three hours a day because of the cold, and was met with a very hostile response. In an interview, she related:

I said at the time that someone had made the comment to me that it's interesting that a lot of the people against keeping the shifts long are women...it's not explicitly an argument about gender—I mean, it wasn't superficially an argument about gender—but I think that there can be a gender argument that can come out of that.

It was particularly her suggestion that the debate had gendered dimensions that seemed to cause agitation. She recalled:

I looked back and someone was actually gesturing towards me quite violently, and I was shocked. He kind of sat forward and threw his hands down like angry, like openly, very aggressive. Which I found was a tremendously strange reaction to a comment. It's like, "why are you getting angry? Don't hit me!" So, it's obviously some sort of resistance.

Such resistance indicates a lack of understanding of the complicated relationship between gender and time use. It also demonstrates that women do not always feel comfortable raising issues of gender inequality, partly for fear that it would be interpreted as a lack of solidarity.

These worries about being accused of lacking solidarity or lacking militancy are clearly bound up with the ways that "worker" or "striker" was constructed through the language used during the strike. In moments on the picket line, in meetings, and on the listserv, the notion of "worker" was taken as gender neutral, although, as Bakker and Elson have shown, gender-neutral often means gender blind.¹⁷ Union members were seen more often than not as a genderless, race-less subjects. One consequence of this, aside from the failure of the local to fully live up to its democratic goal, was

¹⁷ Gender blindness refers to the failure to consider "the different socially determined roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of men and women" (Bakker, I., "Holding Government to Account for their Budgets", p. 5), and is used to explain how applying policy in this manner leads to gender inequality. For more on gender-neutrality, or gender insensitivity, see Jennissen, Therese, "The Federal Social Security Review: A Gender-Sensitive Critique," In *Remaking Canadian Social Policy: Social Security in the Late 1990s*. Jane Pulkingham and Gordon Ternowetsky, eds. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1996, pp. 238-255; Eichler, Margrit, *Nonsexist Research Methods: A Practical Guide*. New York: Routledge, 1991; Elson, Diane, "Gender-Neutral, Gender-Blind or Gender-Sensitive Budgets?" Commonwealth Secretariat. 1999; Bakker, I., "Introduction: Engendering Macro-economic Policy: Reform in the Era of Global Restructuring and Adjustment," in *The Strategic Silence: Gender and Economic Policy*. Isabella Bakker, ed., London: Zed Books, 1994, pp. 1-30; Status of Women Canada, *Gender-Based Analysis: A Guide for Policy-Making*. Ottawa: September 1998.

that raising gender and race issues in the spaces of the picket line, the meeting, and the listserv was highly contentious.

Pointing out issues relating to systemic inequalities posed a fundamental challenge to the idea of what a worker is. As one interviewee argued, in reference to GMMs,

I think...it was about...what's necessary in these kinds of meetings. You have a rank and file worker, which is supposedly genderless, faceless, and bringing all those things forward in the space...doesn't make sense. Because in the context of any general meeting...everyone is equal, supposedly... There's a sense of coming forward in a democratic space of a general meeting of a union that everyone is equal and it doesn't matter if they're a woman or a man, black or white, gay or straight, with child or without child...And that's the assumption, right? And so...I think that once you start to place yourself into a context, or place this argument about gender into this place which doesn't belong, it becomes very contested.

The "genderless, faceless" worker is based on a classical liberal philosophy of personhood, where all citizens are seen as being equal by virtue of being the same.¹⁸ As an interviewee stated, the notion of worker/picketer was

¹⁸ For a feminist perspective on concepts of citizenship, see Shanly, Mary Lyndon and Pateman, Carole, *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

"modeled on universal citizenship...[but] of course, you are full of political complications." Our experience suggests that CUPE 3903 needs a more substantive conception of equality that considers the differences of gender, race, ethnicity, ability and sexual orientation among its members.

In our view, solidarity does not have to mean sameness. Our idea of solidarity falls in line with what Briskin and McDermott call "a feminist vision of a democratic and participatory labour movement that nurtures the militancy and activism of women, indeed, of all workers."¹⁹ Part of the development of the activism of all workers must mean recognizing the different axes of power that flow through all of our lives. As we go on to demonstrate in our next section, however, the recognition of asymmetrical power differences does not always come from below.

Who's Democracy? Our Democracy: Decentralization & Decision-Making

This final section will examine some of the decision-making processes used during the strike and how those processes embodied certain gendered dimensions. Just as time use has been an integral part of feminist thinking about organizing, feminists have also been pioneers in thinking critically about processes of democratic decision-making.²⁰

¹⁹ Briskin, Linda and Patricia McDermott. "The Feminist Challenge to the Unions." In *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993. p 10.

²⁰ See: Adamson, Nancy et al., *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988; Ferguson, Kathy, *The Feminist Case Against*

For CUPE 3903, member participation, during the strike and otherwise—and in contrast to many other Canadian union locals—is viewed by many as integral to the basic functioning of the local. It is a mistake, however, to equate decentralization alone with democracy, especially if the goal is to take gender seriously. By making this claim, we do not intend to promote less democratic decision-making among the rank and file. As Linda Briskin notes, empowering the rank and file is essential to gendering union democracy.²¹ However, we argue that decentralization does not automatically and easily translate into democracy.

Stephanie Ross, a graduate student who researches the history of CUPE organizing, has taken up this point. She notes that CUPE, in an attempt to distinguish itself from notoriously centralized unions, has made efforts to give as much power and control to the locals as possible. Ross' experience with CUPE, however, has "confirmed [her] reluctance to equate unproblematically 'localism' and decentralization with democracy."²² Her reluctance stems from her observation that:

...Some would invoke local autonomy as a way to resist implementation of equity measures, which challenges the underrepresentation of certain groups of members at various levels of the union structure. Many local leaders, ostensibly the guardians of democracy at such centralized

Bureaucracy. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984; Phillips, A., *Engendering Democracy*.

²¹ Briskin, Linda, "Gendering Union Democracy", p. 35.

²² Ross, S., "Rethinking Union Democracy", p. 7.

affairs as national conventions, vehemently opposed measures which would better reflect the diversity of interests in the union, while executive board members and staffers (read the bureaucrats) battled to have these measures implemented.²³

Decentralization cannot be easily equated with democratic practice, then, because progressive change that is race and gender sensitive does not necessarily always spring from the membership. Sometimes it requires leadership to push for progressive representation. Ross' claim here is made in the context of decentralized decision-making across a national union, but feminists have also made this point in research on women and political parties, which demonstrates that localized candidacy selection (meant to enhance grassroots participation) leaves little control by the national party over gender parity.²⁴ Our point here is to emphasize that while CUPE 3903's attitude towards active member participation is extremely valuable (and crucial to our successful win), the goal of democracy in our local cannot fully be achieved unless the gendered consequences of the emphasis upon decentralization are considered.

Decentralized decision-making during the strike was characterized by each picket line having a great deal of autonomy over how the line would be run, including how

²³ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁴ See: Brodie, J., *Women and Politics in Canada*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1985, p. 117; Erickson, Lynda, "Making Her Way In: Women, Parties and Candidacies in Canada." In *Gender and Party Politics*. Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, eds. London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1993, p. 60.

many cars would be stopped, for how long, and so forth. But one consequence of this decentralized decision-making process during the strike was that decisions were made in a localized manner that did not always take the larger (gender) context into account. The starkest example of the gendered consequence of decentralized decision-making that we encountered in our research was told by one of the office coordinators. Union members working in the strike headquarters fielded phone calls from angry drivers who had lengthy waiting periods before they could cross the picket line and enter the campus. This job was extremely stressful for the (mostly female) workers. Our interviewee recalls:

On...the last couple of days...Sentinel line made the decision to hold cars for...the full five minutes. And that was their decision, and that's what they want[ed]. But the office staff kept calling and calling [Sentinel] saying "please don't, people are yelling at us and screaming at us and ripping our heads off." And nobody would listen to that. Sentinel line has the right to do what they want. But that argument was never even considered; about what the office staff was going through, listening to these people [the drivers] scream at them. And it was sort of brushed off, saying 'well, don't answer the phone,' or whatever. But I mean, you have to answer the phone...And the fact that that is a hard job, and that those people actually should have some say somewhere, because they basically don't...because we have democracy on the

lines. *But where's the democracy for the people who are getting slack back in the office?* [emphasis added].

Even we, the authors of this article, who consider ourselves feminists, had failed to recognize the gendered impact of our actions. Both of us had supported Sentinel's decision to hold cars for as long as possible; in fact, one of us had been quite insistent that Sentinel adopt the strategy. We had failed to consider the gendered impact of our actions. The decentralized decision-making process encouraged our line to make decisions without adequate consideration for other people, and in this case, the office workers. The labour those workers were conducting was not recognized as crucial to the strike, nor as being extremely onerous. Because of their distance from the picket line, they were not seen as entitled to participation in union democracy.

Even if decentralized decision-making on the line could be more gender-sensitive, a decentralized form of organization is not appropriate for the office. One interviewee distinguished between the organizational demands of the picket line and those of the office by saying,

To a large extent, the strike was sort of grassroots...well, certainly after it started. Different lines kind of took on their own self-organizing, but that was just never going to happen with the headquarters. Especially since the volunteers felt largely alienated. Some people did [try to organize the office work]. But for the most part, it didn't become self-sustaining. And there's no way people on the

lines could know what needed to be done. But I think the executive had a role and responsibility to deal with that.

Some element of centralized decision-making, at least in regards to the office, was necessary.

Decentralized decision-making also did not seem to be applied consistently. The union executive, for instance, made several decisions to close down the picket lines for various reasons, including rallies and GMMs. On other occasions, however, the executive did not intervene. For example, one of the authors suggested during the strike that the lines should be closed down during the events planned to commemorate Women's Remembrance Day on December 6. Instead, it was suggested by the executive that the decision should be left to individual lines to decide, and that maybe the men could stay on the lines to allow women to attend. This was problematic for several reasons. First, the importance of the day seemed to warrant a more concerted effort. Second, the request to close down the lines was largely in response to the concerns of several male colleagues who wanted to attend the events. Third, given the fact that the point of December 6th commemorations is to draw attention to male violence against women, the union's plan, based on the exclusion of men, seemed incongruous.

We Struck And We Won—Now What?

Because we began this article by stating that our intention was to strengthen democracy in our union, we will briefly outline possible directions for further democratization, particularly with respect to strikes the local may wage in the

future. Regarding the gendered division of labour at Sentinel, we tried to indicate that masculinity was largely expressed in informal ways that cannot (and perhaps should not) be regulated. But there may be formal ways that a gendered division of labour can be addressed. For example, assigning formal tasks on a rotating basis might provide a more equitable distribution of strike labour. This is similar to feminist process for meetings, where different duties (such as chairing and taking minutes) are rotated among members, allowing all members to gain experience in different roles.²⁵ Another suggestion, which we allude to in our third section, would be to encourage the local's executive to exercise greater leadership with respect to gender issues.

Improvements certainly can and should be made with respect to the office work conducted during the strike. As one office coordinator told us, "the whole question of alternate duty needs to be re-thought." First, alternate duty and the coordination of office work must be planned out well in advance of a strike, just as the picket lines are organized several weeks ahead.

Someone had to just make it [office work] a priority, as opposed to just assuming that it would happen. Like, the picket lines didn't just magically spring up. And yet we organized them. We just never put that effort into organizing how the office would work. Because it's seen as just being, "they just do that." Like meals, they just magically appear on the table, and offices just magically produce

²⁵ See: Phillips, A., *Engendering Democracy*.

documents and return phone calls and do all things that happen in offices. It's just total invisible labour.

Second, we must push the notion of striking beyond the boundaries of an "able-ist model," where "if you can't participate by walking around in the cold, you can't participate at all." All members can contribute to the strike, and should be made to feel welcome by other members.

Recommendations on time use may be complicated because there is a tension between the desire to shorten meetings and the desire to have meetings where everyone's voices are heard. Democracy, undoubtedly, takes time. However, we do think that CUPE 3903 should consider and debate a policy similar to that pursued by the United Nurses of Alberta, which we discussed earlier in the paper. A policy that limits the length of meetings may encourage members to be more economical with their comments and discourage repetition (but perhaps this is just wishful thinking). We would also suggest that the union conduct research into the demographic composition of the membership, particularly with respect to the gender and racial breakdown.²⁶ Equipped with this information, the local can be more sensitive to its members needs, both in and outside of a strike situation.

A recommendation with respect to the third section of this paper, on decentralization, seems implicit within our argument, i.e. we would like to see the union executive exercise leadership with respect to race and gender issues should the local go on strike again. As Ross argues,

²⁶ As we understand it, the union is currently conducting this type of research as this article goes to press.

decentralized decision-making processes, "lead us to ask not only whether decentralized structures are (always) more democratic and centralized structures always less democratic, but also what we understand to be 'democratic,' 'autonomous,' and 'effective.'"²⁷ Put differently, we would welcome a debate amongst CUPE 3903 members around what we understand the goals of decentralized decision-making to be, and if it is possible for the membership to motivate itself to think about gender in a progressive way during an intense period like the strike. In a strike situation where individual picket lines do exercise autonomy, lines might be encouraged to discuss their own assumptions about democratic process before decisions are actually made.

Overall, what all three of our conclusions draw attention to is the need for a higher standard of coordination and a greater awareness of gender issues at the level of the picket line, the strike headquarters, listservs and the meetings where decisions are made. To borrow Anne Phillips' phrase, engendering democracy in CUPE 3903 is an unfinished task.²⁸

Conclusion

We began this essay by placing our reflections on gender and the CUPE 3903 strike in the context of our local's emphasis on grassroots democracy. The paper uses as a framework Linda Briskin's assertion that union democracy is gendered. We tried to make three interconnecting points: first, the combined persistence of a gendered division of

²⁷ Ross, S., "Rethinking Union Democracy", p. 9.

²⁸ Phillips, A., *Engendering Democracy*.

labour (with some jobs coded as masculine and others as feminine), and the ongoing undervaluing of women's clerical work during the strike demonstrates that the goal of local democracy was incomplete. Second, a lack of knowledge of the demographic make-up of the union and a gender-neutral model of the worker led to a discourse that problematically linked time-use with militancy. Third, although decentralized decision-making processes allowed for valuable participation among the rank and file during the strike, it also left little room for executive leadership around gender issues and a lack of coordination of (women's) office work.

Being involved in the CUPE 3903 strike was often a rewarding, enlightening, and energizing experience. Although both of us have been politically active for several years, neither of us had ever engaged in a strike before, and we are both proud to have participated in this strike. We did not realize at the beginning that a strike could politicize us in the way it did. As Heather Jon Maroney notes, "By its very nature, a strike situation is an intensive consciousness-raising process."²⁹ Our hope is that by discussing issues of gender, such consciousness-raising will be exactly this: a continuing process, and not a finished project. After all, it is democracy that is on the line.

²⁹ Maroney, Heather Jon. "Feminism at Work", in *Feminism and Political Economy*. Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton, eds. Toronto: Methuen, 1987, p. 61.

