

WOMEN'S LABOUR HISTORY PROJECT FILM/VIDEO PROJECT

SYNOPSIS

Women's Labour History Society

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Women's Labour History Project: Video Project Summary

This project will produce two accessible and much needed video productions about working women's labour force and workplace organization in British Columbia. While including extensive historical research, the audio/visual resources will appeal to a popular audience. They will be suitable as teaching aids for high school, post-secondary, community and labour education.

The series will highlight women's contribution to known events within the B.C. labour movement. We will examine women's unique and hidden contribution to community organization, the unionizing of female-dominated job ghettos, unemployed women, employment standards legislation, union women's committees and other processes.

A teaching guide will accompany each production in order to broaden their value as educational resources.

The current project will focus on two periods: Women in the great depression and women in the war economy with some reference to the post-war period. Interviews, dramatizations of home, work and organizing situations and narration will create a living sense of women's experiences and attempts to improve their own conditions and the lives of those around them. The goal of the productions will be to stimulate discussion, interest the viewer in further information on the subject and develop a realization that women played important roles in B.C.'s working life.

Interviews with former activists in the B.C. labour movement will form the core resource for the films/video. A general historical context will be established both in the beginning and throughout the film.

CONTENT OUTLINE

These productions will provide a vision of women's attitudes towards labour force participation, their various work experiences and the combined pressures of childrearing, homemaking and wage work. The images which currently dominate the province's labour history suggest a largely male workforce in which the impetus for social change came exclusively from men.

Existing resources tell us of the massive unemployment of male youth in the Depression years, the migration of men from the Prairies into British Columbia to swell their ranks, the establishment of government work camps, the campaigns for "work and wages" and "an end to the gunnysack route". We learn of men at work in the war industries, and hear about the impact of changing work methods on the composition and organization of the male labour force. We hear of the fears of unemployment voiced by returning soldiers and their male counterparts in the labour force at the war's end.

Buried in these events there had to be women. There were communities, families, sisters, mothers and wives. There were services, businesses and government offices to be staffed. Existing documentary sources have failed to penetrate into women's daily lives, their feelings and attitudes about home and job.

The Women's Labour History Project has collected the aural histories of women who were instrumental in many of the formative events of the British Columbia labour movement. The images evoked by the interviews present a female face to the traditional male images, an equally important if at times differently situated perspective on the province's history:

British Columbia in the 1930s

IMAGES OF:

- *Women marrying at sixteen to get on relief, bearing three children by the age of twenty and longing for waged work.*
- *Single women working for five dollars a month, room and board, seven days a week, eighteen hours a day : domestic workers.*
- *Women working split shifts, fourteen hour days: waitresses. Waitresses on strike, braving the chance of firing and blacklisting. Women winning a certification at the Trocadero Cafe, inspiring a wave of restaurant unionism.*
- *Mothers marching, calling for jobs for their unemployed children. Women organizing communal kitchens to feed the unemployed on their streets. Women, arms linked, blocking a doorway as the sherriff and his men try to evict a family.*

- *Women, worried about their men suffocating to death in a mine or bleeding their life out under a windfall banding together to form Ladies Auxiliaries. International Woodworkers of America Auxiliary members at Lake Cowichan lobbying for a road to the hospital, a union in the woods, schooling, medical facilities, milk and decent housing for their children.*
- *Women hiding organizers, trekking through the woods to sign up loggers. Women travelling by foot into company towns to deliver illegal birth control devices to desperate women...*

British Columbia during and after the Second World War

IMAGES OF:

- *Women, never before employed, entering the shipyards, aircraft factories, driving trucks in the mines, cutting and stacking lumber. Former waitresses and domestic workers rivetting, welding, burning, painting, hauling.*
- *Women proud to buy their first round of beer for their co-workers on the "steel gang", proud to "string their own hoses".*
- *Women so good at catching rivets that they were the first called for a team when they walked into the yards.*
- *Women watching muscles develop with hard physical labour.*
- *Women working in cafes splitshifts and fourteen hour days. Women ready to walk off the job and into industry if their pay wasn't increased and their work-day shortened. Women organizing around the clock to sign up the downtown cafes.*
- *Women balancing childcare, housework, shopping, splitshifts and swingshifts.*
- *Women asserting their right to membership in the craft unions, helping to set up locals of industrial unions. Women writing columns in union newspapers, demanding the right to stay at work, childcare, equal pay for equal work.*
- *Women planning for industrial development, a merchant marine, social services, housing, consumer industries: post-war jobs.*

And After the war;

- *Women laid off, overwhelmed by the message: "you go home now: We don't need you anymore, as a matter of fact, we don't want you."*
- *Women searching for work with decent pay. Women settling for work at one half the wages of what they were earning a month before.*
- *Women unable to find jobs, refused unemployment benefits. Women "torn in two" by conflicts with returning soldier husbands. Women staying in the mills as the demand for wood grew, ghettoized into the low-skill jobs.*
- *Women heading up the columns in the 1946 IWA strike trek on Vancouver Island. Women, laid-off from wartime jobs forming auxiliaries to stay within the labour movement...*

It is clear from the material available that these videos will fill in a small, but important part of the total picture of women's past lives.