

THE GIRL OF THE NEW DAY:

Canadian Working Women in the 1920s

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CANADIANS recovering from World War One hoped that the 1920s would at last usher in the century that was to be theirs. The modern world's new technologies and new methods of bureaucratic organization might be harnessed to guarantee a better life for all citizens. Liberal feminists also anticipated that much progress towards the liberation of women would come about directly through the invigorated pace of modernization during the decade. Nowhere was their faith in progress greater than in the world of work. A modernized capitalism that stressed employment and promotion based on merit would replace traditions which dictated occupations allocated on the basis of the ascribed and inferior status of women. Working women were thus to be beneficiaries of a reorganized and updated capitalist order. Yet as recent literature on the 1920s suggests,¹ the decade finally offered little to those who hoped for general liberalization. For women inequality in the workplace did not disappear, it merely modernized its forms.

The failure to make great gains has sometimes been obscured by a fascination with women doctors, lawyers and other professionals.² Yet at best such

I should like to thank Suzann Buckley, Gregory and Linda Kealey, Michael Piva, Douglas Ross and Jennifer Stoddart for their comments at various stages in the preparation of this article.

¹ See, for instance, W. Calderwood, "Pulpit, Press and Political Reactions to the Klu Klux Klan in Saskatchewan," in S.M. Trofimenkoff, ed. *The Twenties in Western Canada*, (Ottawa 1972); H. Glynn-Ward, *The Writing on the Wall*, introduced by P.E. Roy (Toronto 1974); V. Strong-Boag, "Canadian Feminism in the 1920s: the Case of Nellie L. McClung," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 12, 4 (Summer 1977), 58-68; James Struthers, "Prelude to Depression: The Federal Government and Unemployment, 1918-29," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (1977), 277-293. Marie Lavigne, Jennifer Stoddart, "Ouvrières et travailleuses Montréalaises 1900-1940," in M. Lavigne and Y. Pinard, eds. *Les Femmes dans la société Québécoise* (Montreal 1977); S.M. Trofimenkoff, *Action Française* (Toronto 1975).

² This is all the more misleading as it is increasingly apparent that women in the "male" professions had substantial problems in the 1920s. See, for instance, Strong-Boag, "Feminism Constrained: The Graduates of Canada's Medical Schools for Women," in L. Kealey, ed. *A Not Unreasonable Claim. Women and Social Reform in Canada*, (Toronto 1979).

individuals constituted a small, atypical minority. The fate of most working women lay in non-professional employment. This study is an exploratory survey of the situation facing that majority. It begins with a brief characterization of the workforce followed by a lengthier evaluation of some of the influences which determined job selection. As we shall see "career" choices were basically of two types. The first, familiar blue collar occupations, were found in personal service and manufacturing. The second, in large measure white collar, originated at the heart of the modern industrial state in the transportation and communication, commerce and finance and clerical fields which had only relatively recently welcomed significant numbers of women. Neither choice offered women the equality which feminists hoped for. The study then investigates women's collective and individual reactions to a discriminatory work situation. More exploited than their white collar sisters, blue collar workers, notably those in manufacturing, exhibited higher, more visible levels of unrest. The concluding section reviews the minimum wage legislation which, ironically enough, confirmed how little had really changed despite all the hopes of the early 1920s.

I

THE 1920s — the first decade in which the majority of Canadians were urban-dwellers — continued long-established trends favouring a disproportionately large female population in the cities and increased female participation in the labour force. The predominance of women in urban areas was especially noticeable in the 15-24 and 24-34 age groups when women were most likely to be seeking both paid work and marital prospects. Not unexpectedly, as Table I indicates, the proportion of women between 16 and 34 who were gainfully employed was considerably larger than the figures reported for all women in 1921 and 1931. For age groups after the mid-30s employment among women dropped dramatically. Not yet was there that massive return to the labour force of older wives which later characterized the female work force.³

Unchanged from the nineteenth century was the fact that the majority of these young working women were single. Once women won husbands, they generally withdrew from paid labour. Nevertheless, steadily increasing numbers of married women entered wage employment: 35,202 or 7.19 per cent of the female labour force in 1921 and 66,798 or 10.03 per cent in 1931. Divorced or widowed women were also relatively common: 51,202 or 10.4 per cent of female wage-earners in 1921 and 61,335 or 9 per cent in 1931. The size of these groups fluctuated considerably from season to season or even month to month. It was generally observed, for instance, that whenever there arose a

³ Available labour force statistics are probably somewhat misleading at the higher age levels as many older women participated in the paid work force as day charwomen, laundresses, boarding house keepers or pedlars on a part-time basis and were likely to be missed.

"scarcity of work for women, the number of married women applying for casual employment was greater than under ordinary conditions."⁴ This pattern added flexibility to the family's earning power just as it strained women assuming a double burden of responsibility.⁵ Nor were wives the only female workers with additional obligations. Commentators on female employment regularly concluded that the "single girl often has the financial responsibility of the support of a relative."⁶ The absence of any widespread pension system cast many older men and women upon either charity or their families for support. Adult children were expected and, in some provinces, required to support their dependent parents. Others assumed the care of needy brothers and sisters.

Table I

Labour Force Participation Rate of Female Population, 10 Years and Over by Age Group, 1921 and 1931

	1921	1931
Total	15.27%	17.04%
10-15 years	2.84	1.37
16-19	32.16	30.33
20-24	35.06	42.36
25-34	17.23	21.73
35-64	10.68	11.99
65 plus	6.22	6.17

SOURCE. Canada, Census, 1931.

These female wage-earners found the necessary jobs in various ways. In most cases personal contact was probably essential. Family and friends provided information about opportunities, conditions, salaries and bosses.⁷ The textile industry was typical among the older manufacturing processes in being recognized as a "family" industry in that often the children and sometimes the

⁴ "Report of the Windsor Free Employment Bureau," *Annual Report of the Ontario Department of Labour, Sessional Papers of Ontario* (henceforth SPO), 1928, #10, 42.

⁵ It is of course difficult to know how much home work was performed by the husband of the working woman in the 1920s, but modern studies give no cause for optimism. See, for instance, Martin Meissner, "Sexual Division of Labour and Inequality," in M. Stephenson, ed. *Women in Canada*, (Toronto 1977).

⁶ Annual Report of the British Columbia Department of Labour, 1927, 72.

⁷ A useful discussion of the informal recruitment network which stresses the role of the foreman is Daniel Nelson, *Managers and Workers. Origins of the New Factory System in the United States 1880-1920* (Madison 1975), ch. 5. Informal networks were perhaps most essential for the non-native-born. See, for special reference to women, C. Baum, P.A. Hyman, S. Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York 1977), *passim*.

wife, in addition to the family-head, find employment in one mill."⁸ In this way first jobs could be discovered near home and in familiar company. In the 1920s vocational advice from schools, magazines and employment bureaus increasingly augmented older informal networks. This formalization of the job selection process reflected the rapid modernization of the Canadian economy during this period.⁹ Ever more powerful pressure from the expanding state and corporate bureaucracies was employed to insure that citizens enlisted in jobs which met the needs of the social and sexual status quo.

Girls in contact with such influences discovered generally cheerful forecasts in the early 1920s. Although most "guidance" advisors presumed that girls would eventually opt for marriage, they were also cautiously optimistic about employment.¹⁰ Subscribers to a whig view of history, they congratulated themselves that there was in modern Canada a wide range of jobs *suitable* for girls. Among these they included stenography, nursing, bee-keeping, millinery, retailing, clerking and telegraph operating. According to them modern opportunities made it unnecessary for respectable young women to seek employment in "masculine" fields such as carpentry, electrical work, automobiles, iron and steel and the like. Counsellors liked to believe that the expansion in woman's "own" sphere supplied opportunities enough and, in addition, offered benefits more precious than money. The manual authorized for use in Ontario schools in the 1920s, for example, anticipated that "The increasing opportunities of girls, both in home-making and paid employment, are likely to become a contributing factor in the humanizing of every form of industry."¹¹ For those with more practical concerns, some commentators even predicted new upward mobility. In 1919 the principal of Toronto's elite girls' school, Havergal College, was generally confident, for all her admission of preliminary hardships: "... remember, the road will be long and tiresome. There will be plenty of room at the top, but there is no elevator to swing you swiftly aloft; your only access will be steep and stony stairs."¹² Prospective job-seekers who culled advice from *Saturday Night* and *Maclean's*, both lead-

⁸ Canada, Royal Commission on the Textile Industry, *Final Report*, 1938, 157. See also the similar situation in a bakery in "Christie-Brown Plant Has Undergone Thorough Clean-up Since Change," *Financial Post*, 14 August 1925.

⁹ For a description of economic development in the period see W.A. Mackintosh, *The Economic Background of Dominion-Provincial Relations* (Toronto 1964), ch. 5; A.E. Safarian, *The Canadian Economy and the Great Depression* (Toronto 1970), 27-39; and L.G. Reynolds, *The Control of Competition in Canada* (Cambridge, Mass. 1940), ch. I-V *passim*.

¹⁰ The outstanding examples of this type of literature in the period were Marjory MacMurchy, *The Canadian Girl at Work* (Toronto 1920); Ellen Knox, *The Girl of the New Day* (Toronto 1919) and Alice Parkin Massey, *Occupations for Trained Women in Canada* (Toronto 1920).

¹¹ MacMurchy, *Canadian Girl*, vi.

¹² Knox, *New Day*, 105.

ing magazines of the decade, would have been similarly reassured about the satisfying posts awaiting eager young women.¹³ Even occupations with unhappy records did not escape favourable reassessment. Ontario's vocational brochures on the garment trade, for instance, promised that "For those with executive gifts the opportunities are good."¹⁴

Hopeful forecasts sprang in part from the high expectations born of suffrage and wartime victories. Nothing, however, could fully exclude cold realism. Principal Knox, for instance, acknowledged the special shortcomings of banks:

It is no fun working night after night for a missing three cents; no fun training juniors and, if these juniors are boys, seeing them shoot ahead at higher salary; no fun working on and on without the ghost of a chance of being general manager; no fun working at top speed and seeing the man beside you, who is working at what you call ten dollar speed, for the sake of increased salary quickening to fifteen or twenty dollar speed, and never turning a hair over it.¹⁵

Similarly, Ontario's essentially optimistic vocational bulletins on the textile and furniture industries could not entirely ignore the prevailing low wages.¹⁶

The thrust of such guidance was finally discriminatory, envisioning that, in large measure, men and women were suited to different types of employment. It also took as operating assumptions that women would neither have to support a family nor seek power and status. Instead they would be well satisfied with pleasant surroundings, congenial workmates and, above all, male bosses. The rapid growth in white collar employments was widely regarded as proof positive of improvement by those who guided girls to critical job decisions. Indeed these were regularly made glamorous unlike the older manual jobs whose records sternly resisted all efforts at reclamation.

Governments did nothing to broaden girls' chances or outlook. The application of the 1919 Technical Education Act maintained official interest in promoting domestic service for poorer female students and domestic careers for all. Programmes under this plan, together with the more successful *Écoles ménagères* in Quebec, were part of the earlier discriminatory pattern of female education.¹⁷ To be sure, newer trends found acknowledgement in typing and stenography courses. These proved so attractive that Ontario's Assistant Director of

¹³ See, for instance, "Heads a \$1,000,000 Corporation," *Maclean's*, 1 May 1921, 65-6 and "Art Collecting as a Profession for Women," *Saturday Night*, 5 April 1919 which are typical examples of coverage given to the workplace.

¹⁴ *Labour Gazette* (December 1920), 1618.

¹⁵ Knox, *New Day*, 107.

¹⁶ *Labour Gazette* (March 1921), 373-6.

¹⁷ See Robert Stamp, "Teaching Girls their 'God Given Place in Life'," *Atlantis* 2, 2, (Spring 1977), 18-34; Mgr. Albert Tessier, "Les écoles ménagères au service du foyer," (1942) and *L'Association des femmes diplômées des universités* (Montreal), "Les idées directrices des Instituts familiaux et leurs conséquences: extraits," (1964) in M. Jean, ed., *Québécoises du 20e siècle* (Montréal 1974).

Technical Education had to admit that "it is almost impossible to induce our adolescent girls to take up this specialized training [domestic science]."¹⁸ Governments did their best to offset "unsatisfactory" career choices. Ontario, for example, planned to have boys in all programmes study "Fundamentals of Business" and "Sociology" and enroll all girls for "Child Welfare" and "Elements of Nursing."¹⁹ The other major vocational initiative by governments in the 1920s was still more discriminatory. Ontario's 1928 Apprenticeship Act made no provision at all for girls. It applied solely to boys entering nine building trades.

Governments channeled job-seeking women into suitable jobs in other ways as well. The Free Employment Bureaus established in provinces in the 1920s with the assistance of Ottawa, for example, concentrated on placing female domestics.²⁰ Middle-class householders soon became accustomed to using the services of these public agencies in much the same way as they relied on the efforts of immigration officials to discover foreign-born domestics when none could be found at home.²¹

The restricted options presented to female job-seekers at every turn reflected two facts of Canadian life. First, the great majority of citizens supported and employed socialization practices which consigned each sex to different duties.²² Guidance in job selection was no different. Women had careers in motherhood; at best, they had jobs in the market place. Second, the range of employment was tailored in the first instance to the "needs" of poorer Canadians. Since it was generally believed that few women with adequate family resources would seek work, serious advice, particularly from governments, was preeminently designed to place working-class girls in "suitable" posts, particularly domestic service. In this way the class and sexual hierarchy in the

¹⁸ Mr. F.S. Rutherford, "What Technical Schools Have Done to Meet the Recommendations of the Royal Commission on Technical Education," *Labour Gazette* (May 1928), 473.

¹⁹ Annual Report of the Ontario Department of Education, SPO, 1928 #17, 14.

²⁰ Saskatchewan's city bureaus in 1926-27, for instance, supplied 1,949 female requests for housekeeping positions, 2,080 for domestic, 3,010 for scrubbing and 385 for cooking. Such women made up 75.84 per cent of all applicants to the employment offices. Urban vacancies for women in the same year in the domestic service category made up 94.18 per cent of all requests for help. Annual Report of the Saskatchewan Bureau of Labour and Industries, 1926-7.

²¹ See Suzann Buckley, "Some Schemes for the Emigration of British Females to Canada, 1884-1931," Paper presented at the meetings of the Canadian Historical Association, Quebec City, 1976; for a later period see R. Pierson, "Home Aid," *Atlantis*, 2, 2, II (Spring 1977), 85-97.

²² See, for example, the girlhood experiences recalled in N.L. McClung, *Clearing in the West* (Toronto 1935); Elizabeth Goudie, *Woman of Labrador* (Toronto 1973); Laura Salverson, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* (Toronto 1939); Madge MacBeth, *Boulevard Career* (Toronto 1957); and T.F. Casgrain, *Une Femme chez les hommes* (Montréal 1971).

workplace, as elsewhere, would be maintained. This narrow, class-conscious vision expanded slightly in the 1920s, but its influence acted in concert with sexual stereotyping to eliminate effectively better, "male" occupations from serious consideration for girls.

II

THE CONTINUING conservatism of attitudes to female employment ensured that modern women like their grandmothers would be ghettoized into relatively few occupations. While men were widely dispersed over a broad range of industrial groups, non-professional women were concentrated in five — personal service, manufacturing, transportation and communication, commerce and finance and clerical — which contained 73.61 per cent of all female labourers in 1921 and 78.36 per cent in 1931. Jobs in these blue and white collar categories were characterized most often by low wages, irregular work and dull, dead end tasks. Considerable job mobility was the inevitable outcome. It was not uncommon, for instance, for women to shift from factory work to waitressing or from millinery to fruitpicking within a single year.²³ Naturally skill, age, marital status and education restrained interchange between jobs, but transiency was a feature of many women's employment history.²⁴ This mobility was ever-present, inevitably blurring the boundaries between the six occupations which, for clarity's sake, are examined separately below.

As in every previous decade of Canada's history, more women were registered in personal service than any other single occupational category. Here workers confronted traditionally small work units, low productivity, non-standardized conditions and unregulated authority. Since occupations such as domestic service and waitressing stressed health and stamina, workers by and large had little need of formal schooling. Not only did such jobs attract the poorly educated, they also enlisted both the youngest and oldest of paid workers — those presumably whose skills and attractiveness were least and whose need and vulnerability greatest.²⁵ Here too were grouped the largest number of

²³ See Ontario, Royal Commission on Unemployment, *Report*, 1916, 180.

²⁴ On the importance of transiency see Michael Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass. 1976) and David Gagan, Herbert Mays, "Historical Demography and Canadian Social History: Families and Land in Peel County, Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review*, 54 (1973), 27-47. These studies examine the nineteenth century but there is little reason to suppose matters changed much in the first decades of the twentieth century, especially for those workers with few marketable skills. See, for instance, the working experience of Phyllis Knight in P. Knight, R. Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life* (Vancouver 1974). Note that my use of the word "transiency" would include both changing jobs and/or locale. The other studies focus on residential shifts which often in fact include occupational changes.

²⁵ In 1921 and 1931 the service category contained 71.15% and 82.23% of all 10-13 year old working 'women' and 42.24% and 41.46% of all working women over 65.

immigrants as well as an increasing number of non-Anglo-Saxons. New job opportunities opened during World War One had confirmed an earlier trend away from domestic service by the native-born.²⁶ Contemporaries believed that new skills together with "the possession of fairly substantial bank accounts as a result of war work, the great increase in the number of marriages subsequent to the return of the troops" added to "the disinclination to turn to an occupation whose social standing is erroneously rated below that of factory work."²⁷ By 1931 64.44 per cent of all gainfully-employed Central European women and 70.43 per cent of all gainfully-employed Eastern European women toiled as domestics. Their contribution was increasingly important because one traditional source of recruitment continued to dry up after the war. Quebecers were not alone in lamenting that "our young country girls, who formerly used to engage with families, now prefer going into factories, where wages are higher."²⁸ Its heavy non-native-born makeup helped lower this occupation's prestige within the working woman's world.

Between 1921 and 1931 the number of general servants or maids of all work jumped from 78,118 to 134,043. Much of this gain was probably due to the especially severe economic crisis of 1931, although 1921 was also depressed. Whenever there was an economic downswing "Many workers . . . registered for housework . . . they intended to return to their trades when an opportunity arose."²⁹ For those with limited resources it offered promise of housing and feeding children. The Employment Bureau of Toronto, for instance, noticed that women regularly sought "positions where they can take a child . . . [even] two or sometimes three children."³⁰ The persistence of domestic openings, however unsatisfactory, meant that the service often operated as the unemployment insurance of the poorer woman. Few with alternatives stayed on. The reaction of twelve White Russian refugee women placed as domestics in Ottawa would have been commonplace, but that five were "aristocrats." Ontario's Employment Service had to report that "Within two months only two remained in domestic service."³¹ Notably, none of the "ladies" stayed, all fled to Toronto and a department store.

When they could not escape domestic work, women tried to obtain either

²⁶ See Enid M. Price, "Changes in the Industrial Occupations of Women in the Environment of Montreal during the Period of the War, 1914-1918," MA thesis, McGill 1919.

²⁷ "Report of the Toronto Employment Bureau," Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Trades and Labour Branch of the Ontario Department of Public Works, 50.

²⁸ Annual Report of the Quebec Department of Public Works and Labour, 1921, 131. See also Strong-Boag, *The Parliament of Women* (Ottawa 1976), *passim*, regarding the efforts of some middle-class mistresses to deal with the unpopularity of domestic service.

²⁹ Annual Report of the Ontario Department of Labour, SPO, 1925, #16, 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1921, #16, 40.

³¹ "Report of the Ottawa Bureau of the Employment Service of Canada." SPO, 1924, #16, 40.

day work or employment other than in a private home. In particular the great majority resisted "living-in" with all the control and supervision this entailed. For all the ingenuity of governments in promoting domestic service (an effort they made for no other industry to the same degree), women voiced familiar grievances. Relatively unchanged from the nineteenth century were "the long hours and the lack of freedom." Servants were "the only class of labour who continue to work, not from seven to seven but often from seven to nine or ten o'clock with only every other Sunday afternoon off."³² Long hours were aggravated by lack of privacy, poor accommodation and low status — in a word, dependence. Recurring efforts to modernize the occupation through emphasis on professional conduct and sound training were always shipwrecked on the popular evaluation of housework as women's work, therefore, by definition, meriting low pay and prestige.

Restaurant dining had proliferated along with Canadian cities. By the 1920s women were commonplace in this highly competitive field, especially in the more vulnerable smaller establishments. There is also some evidence that women with lower wages were displacing waiters.³³ Like domestic service, hours were almost always long and the pace uneven with precise conditions fluctuating unpredictably from one business to another.³⁴ Meals, often eaten on the run, were generally provided and gratuities were essential to survival. The variability of this tip income added immeasurably to the instability of the employment. Nevertheless, while posts in this occupation were often at the mercy of relatively minor shifts in supervisors and finances, their skills could be quickly acquired and they offered, as domestic service rarely did, contact with a world of equals as well as role-delimited superiors.³⁵

Women did not predominate in manufacturing as they did in personal service. Nonetheless, it too remained a major employer. For example, it included 33.5 percent of Montreal's female workers in 1921 and 23.4 percent in 1931.³⁶ Low-wage, highly competitive industries such as clothing, but also textiles, shoes and food processing, had hired relatively large numbers of women and girls for many years but higher wage, capital intensive, often monopolistic firms engaged in the production of such commodities as automobiles, electrical

³² Annual Report of the Ontario Department of Labour, SPO, #10, 30.

³³ See strike of Toronto waiters against the hiring of waitresses, *Labour Gazette* (April 1922).

³⁴ For a description of conditions see E.E. Hancox, "What Hotel and Cafeteria Life Means to the Worker," *The Worker* (Toronto), 31 October 1925 and F.P. Grove, *Search for America* (Montreal 1928), ch. III-VII.

³⁵ The life of the young waitress, Florentine, in Gabrielle Roy's *The Tin Flute* (New York 1947) provides a realistic portrayal of the opportunities for human contact.

³⁶ On the importance of manufacturing in Montreal see Lavigne, Stoddart, "Ouvrières et Travailleuses Montréalaises," 127-32.

machinery, farm equipment and liquor, had little if any room for them.³⁷ Wherever they were found, females were generally assigned their own particular "sphere." Custom and unions not only excluded them from entire areas of production but often segregated them into distinct operations within individual industries. In clothing, as elsewhere, for example, women were barred from the more skilled and well-paid work. As a result, female apprenticeship, when this existed, was short. Even when it is difficult to appreciate the difference of expertise or effort involved, as in pocketmaking (male) and buttonhole sewing (female) in the ready-made clothing industry, you could still be sure of a substantial wage difference.³⁸

Yet old practices remained subject to change in the 1920s. The continuing introduction of new technologies frequently left precise sex jurisdictions confused. They sometimes offered employers the opportunity to shift from better paid men to cheaper women. Such substitution added to industrial turmoil without granting women any significant improvement in status or wages. The installation of more up-to-date equipment was commonly accompanied by a general speed-up. This was true, for instance, of Edmonton's Great West Garment Company which in 1929 installed "special two needle machines," allowing it both to cut staff and maintain production levels.³⁹ The result encouraged unrest in the clothing trades throughout the decade.

Closely related to speed-up in manufacturing were bonusing and piecework. The former was "extra" money granted after certain production goals were met. In practice such funds were often essential, not incidental, to a woman's budget. Piecework was the policy of paying by amount rather than time — the quicker, more efficient, workers earning the most. Both policies pushed workers, men and women alike, to raise their speed to match the quickest, often resulting in considerable physical and nervous strain. Neither bonusing nor piecework was unheard of earlier but they appear to have been taken up with a vengeance in the 1920s, at least in industries where there were large numbers of women.⁴⁰ In many cases as speed increased rates were

³⁷ See, for example, J. Rouillard, *Les Travailleurs du coton au Québec 1900-1915* (Québec 1974). On the continuation of this pattern into the 1970s see Pat and Hugh Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto* (Toronto 1978).

³⁸ See, for example, "Samples of Wages and Hours of Labour for Miscellaneous Factory Trades," *Labour Gazette*, Supplement (January 1930), 40-95.

³⁹ "United Garment Workers Union Helps Boss to Impose Worsened Conditions," *The Worker*, 28 September 1929. These new machines and procedures were part of the continuing introduction of the "scientific management and industrial efficiency" movement into Canadian operations. For a valuable study of this development in the pre-wwi period see Craig Heron and Bryan D. Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-14," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (1977), 423-58.

⁴⁰ The use of "incentive" practices appeared in the nineteenth century factory but their introduction appears to have been intermittent and uneven. For a helpful discussion of

reduced, thus starting the vicious circle over again.

The regularity of work stoppages owing to the introduction of piecework spoke volumes for labouring women's opposition. More often than not, however, their collective vulnerability compelled women to endure the regime condemned by one Jewish immigrant in a Montreal dress factory:

You can never do enough for the boss. Every half hour the boss counts the number of dresses on our chairs. I am a finisher, and sometimes I feel like doing something desperate when I see the girls rushing the lives out of themselves, each to do more dresses than the other. The Jewish girls are just the same. I can't keep up with them. . . . We fight all the time at the table because of this. Some of the girls because they thought I was a "green" at the beginning stole some of my dresses and put them on their chairs when I went out of the room for a few minutes.⁴¹

Nor were such conditions limited to "fly-by-night" or smaller firms. Even the Eatons who publicized their on-the-job "philanthropy" did not hesitate to take advantage of clothing trades workers.⁴²

Factory conditions continued to add to women's difficulties as well. The construction of modern premises and the remodelling of older establishments had improved safety, ventilation and sanitation somewhat since the abuses uncovered by the 1889 Report of the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital, but numerous dangers went uncorrected. In addition, safer conditions sprang ironically from unrelated developments. Two popular fashions of the decade, bobbed hair and short skirts, freed workers in certain industries from being scalped or pulled into machinery.⁴³ In some factories the introduction of individual motors with their elimination of overhead belting also helped do away with the cause of earlier accidents. Despite these improvements, provincial authorities had to be vigilant. "Modern" advances were not always accepted with alacrity. Too often "employers" objected "to modern safety equipment being placed on their machines, fearing it will retard production."⁴⁴

Industrial hygiene was similarly often lamentable. The 1920 Nova Scotian commission investigating women's working conditions branded firms with a typical indictment.

The toilets in a great many factories should be condemned. It would appear in many

some of the issues related to these practices see Nelson, *Managers and Workers*, ch. 3. For evidence of their increased use in Canada in the 1920s see the strike files of the federal Department of Labour for the period.

⁴¹ "In a Dress Factory," Working Women's Section, *The Worker*, 12 September 1925.

⁴² See "Working for Eaton's, 1934," *The Dirty Thirties*, edited by M. Horn (Toronto 1972).

⁴³ See "Report of Inspectress Eleanor Gurnett," Report of the Ontario Department of Labour, SPO, 1925, #16, 49.

⁴⁴ "Report of Inspectress G. E. Hornell," *ibid.*, SPO, 1927, #10, 51. For a discussion of changes in the factory environment see Nelson, *Managers and Workers*, ch. 2.

cases, as if the management thought it a waste of room to give up to toilets a greater space than four or five feet square, even for the use of a large number of employees. Frequently they were found to be dirty, ill ventilated, indifferently lighted, and . . . toilets for women, instead of being entirely separate, were found to be entered directly from the factory and separated from the men's toilet by only a thin wooden partition.⁴⁵

The survival of such conditions made a laughing stock of government regulations which, in most jurisdictions, had first been passed in the nineteenth century.

Yet for all the failings of factories, they remained preferable to the home labour which continued so much a feature of clothing manufacture in particular.⁴⁶ As is often the case modern practices incorporated the old as much as they eliminated them. Throughout the decade inspectors observed that increasing amounts of work were escaping supervision by being subcontracted either to small middlemen or to the individual homemaker. Of course not all such operations abandoned the factory. The Quebec Minimum Wage Board joined others in identifying the special difficulties presented by a subcontractor using the contractor's premises:

The sub-contracting workman employs young girls or boys to help him and pays them what he thinks is fair or what he sees fit. As oftenest happens, the wages of this help do not appear in the employers' pay-sheets, the latter claiming that they are not in his employ, although working in his factory.⁴⁷

The majority of subcontracting, however, was removed from the factory altogether into still more unsatisfactory premises. A "family group of foreign origin who baste and hem around the kitchen stove"⁴⁸ might recall pre-industrial patterns, but the exploitation was modern. Although sheltered from the critical eye of a strange foreman, such workers also lost whatever protection the law or a union might offer. Sweatshops survived because they were "an ideal arrangement of course from the employers' viewpoint as it is much cheaper labour and at the same time save him [sic] factory space and the purchase of extra sewing machines. . . ."⁴⁹

In view of the hardships of the traditional blue collar employments, it is little wonder that job applicants, especially the native-born and the better-

⁴⁵ Nova Scotia. Royal Commission on Wages, Hours of Labour and Work Conditions of Women in Industry in Nova Scotia, *Report*, 1920, 11. See also conditions in Montreal in T. Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty* (Toronto 1974), ch. 3.

⁴⁶ For a useful reminder of the uneven application of mechanization and the continuing importance of hand labour for an earlier period but which is also relevant to some degree for the 1920s see R. Samuel, "Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in mid-Victorian Britain," *History Workshop*, 3 (Spring 1977), 6-72.

⁴⁷ "Report of the Women's Minimum Wage Commission," Annual Report of the Quebec Department of Public Works and Labour, 1930, 70.

⁴⁸ Annual Report of the Ontario Minimum Wage Board, SPO, 1923, #89, 27.

⁴⁹ Mrs. E. Scott, Annual Report of the Ontario Department of Labour, SPO, 1930, #23, 69.

educated, looked increasingly to what newer white collar employment might offer. Here would lie the real test of the benefits of the modern economy for women. Had equity really been won in the efficiency-conscious, bureaucratically-oriented structures of corporate capitalist society?

The introduction of the telephone gave women their first opportunity to enter the field of transportation and communications in significant numbers. The steady increase in telephones from 779,000 in December 1919 to 1,383,000 in December 1929 and the heavy reliance on manual rather than automatic switchboards underlay a relatively strong demand for operators or traffic employees as they were commonly called.⁵⁰ The switchboard, with all the dexterity, quickness and patience it required, dovetailed with the prevailing female image. Talkative, uncreative females were best equipped, so it seemed, to withstand the tension of close supervision, variable rates of business and clients' eccentricities. Conditions had improved since the early days of Canadian telephones but the work remained stressful and exhausting.⁵¹

Young women had replaced early male operators as the mainstay of businesses like the Bell Telephone Company of Canada, the Manitoba Telephone System and the Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company. Just as in the United States, Canadian companies "preferred to hire from among the untrained and relatively impressionable young just entering the job market..."⁵² Preliminary training for operators took several weeks at company offices where young women were encouraged to identify with the company. In this way "team spirit" could be harnessed to the goal of higher profits. Not coincidentally it also tended to foster views which isolated telephone employees from other workers.

Although both men and women were expected to give company loyalty top priority, they were rewarded very differently. Qualified male personnel might advance steadily within company ranks but women's ambitions were confined to the position of chief operator.⁵³ To offset such disadvantages as well as

⁵⁰ Series S323-331, M. Urquhart, K. Buckley, *Historical Statistics* (Toronto 1965), 559; for some of the arguments in favour of automatic switchboards and their effect on operators see R. Young, "Automatic Telephony" (1921) in F.S. Grant, ed., *Telephone Operation and Development in Canada, 1921-1971* (Toronto 1974), 12-21.

⁵¹ See conditions revealed in the Report of the Royal Commission Regarding the Dispute Respecting Hours of Employment between the Bell Telephone Company of Canada Ltd., and Operators at Toronto, 1907. While physical conditions have improved, it appears that modern personnel practices maintain the psychological stress which was so much a feature of the employment from the beginning. See Elinor Langer, "Inside the New York Telephone Company," *New York Review of Books*, 12 March 1970, 16, 17-18, 20-24 and "The Women of the Telephone Company," *ibid.*, 26 March 1970, 14, 16-22.

⁵² J.N. Schacht, "Toward Industrial Unionism: Bell Telephone Workers and Company Unions, 1919-1937," *Labor History*, 16 (1975), 12.

⁵³ On training of Operators see Mr. N.G. Fitchpatrick, "Training Plans for Traffic

sidestep demands for unions, businesses conferred recreational, health and welfare plans on their young employees.⁵⁴ Such paternalistic experiments were a partial explanation for the poor record of unions in this sector. Company benefits were not, however, sufficient to retain staff. Turnover remained considerable. Few operators continued into their 30s.

Women in search of better white collar employment turned also to commerce and finance, an industrial group which showed a marked rise of 15.4 per cent in the number of female employees from 1921 to 1931. Many of these women, again often high school graduates, served behind counters in shops and department stores. Salesgirls had been replacing male clerks fairly steadily since the 1880s. The emergence of department stores and, in particular in the 1920s, chain stores with their abundance of menial employments accelerated substitution.⁵⁵ Such opportunities were, however, strictly limited. In 1914 a survey of the four Winnipeg department stores reported between 2432 to 3200 female employees, yet not one female department head. The assistant buyer was generally the highest position open to women. One store, for instance, ruled that no women could be managers.⁵⁶ The journalist Marjory MacMurphy, advising high school students five years later, observed that it was occasionally possible to move to the head of a department "and in somewhat rare cases she may become a buyer."⁵⁷ There is no reason to believe matters improved in the later 1920s. The path of advancement, such as it was, in department stores stretched from parcelling through the cash office, clerical work or the stock room to the salesforce, headship of a section, and then, very uncommonly, management.⁵⁸

Opportunities were still fewer in the smaller notion stores where "Though there are from four to five times as many women and girls as men and boys . . . the position of management is seldom open to women."⁵⁹ Chances for promotion were best in areas clearly marked as fields of female expertise such as

Employees" in Telephone Association of Canada, *Proceedings of the 7th Annual Convention*, 1927, 135-8. For an indication of how little attention was paid to the possibility of training women for higher positions see TAC, *Proceedings of the 5th Annual Convention*, 1925, 62-92.

⁵⁴ For a description of some of these programmes see Mr. E.F. Helliwell, "Employee Relations" in TAC, *Proceedings of the 3rd Annual Convention*, 1923, 115-129. For an analysis of the U.S. Bell system which appears comparable to that in Canada see Schacht, "Toward Industrial Unionism," 12-14.

⁵⁵ Regarding the expansion of the chain stores see Clifford H. Cheasley, *The Chain Store Movement in Canada*, McGill University Economic Studies, no. 17, n.d.

⁵⁶ University Women's Club of Winnipeg, "The Work of Women and Girls in the Department Stores of Winnipeg," 1914.

⁵⁷ MacMurphy, *The Canadian Girl at Work*, 12.

⁵⁸ *Vocational Opportunities in the Industries of Ontario. A Survey. Department Stores*, 1920, 4-5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

millinery. Here almost alone female managers could be found. Self-service grocery chains such as Loblaw's of Toronto and Carroll's of Hamilton revealed much the same pattern of discrimination as did drug store chains such as G. Tamblin Company and Louis K. Liggett of Toronto. Such stores justified failure to give female staff greater responsibility by emphasizing their lack of "independence of thought."⁶⁰

The relative pleasantness and respectability of store work attracted a large pool of applicants.⁶¹ Drawn on as part-timers in busy periods, they threatened wages and hours for all full-time employees. Nonetheless, occasional jobs did offer unique advantages to women whose household responsibilities allowed only brief absences.

The clerical field offered advantages similar to commerce and finance. It too welcomed more applicants than it required. In 1920, for instance, the Toronto office of the Employment Service lamented that "The sign of the armistice had its effects upon the clerical . . . situation. The closing of many offices left a great number of stenographers and clerks without positions. . . ."⁶² Oversupply continued in the later 1920s when private and public agencies competed in turning out stenographers and typists to fill jobs created by "the bureaucratic and commercial revolution of the twentieth century."⁶³ Oversupply was all the more permanent a phenomenon because women were bunched at the lowest ranks of business and government. Although MacMurchy advised that, "The girl who is a college grad is not too well equipped to be a stenographer,"⁶⁴ even superior qualifications did not guarantee promotion. The inauguration of a degree course in secretarial science at the University of Western Ontario in the mid-1920s was an excellent indication of how bright girls were expected to limit their horizons.⁶⁵

The federal government harboured typical reservations about its female clericals. Women had enlisted in its ranks by the 1870s but World War One brought the great influx of women into the "inside" service in Ottawa. The rapid expansion in the number of female clerks soon sparked controversy. Alarm grew lest they disrupt male recruitment to the higher levels of the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶¹ See conditions described by 'YL' (Montreal), "Conditions in the Departmental Store," Women's Section, *The Worker*, 6 February 1925.

⁶² Fourth Annual Report of the Trades and Labour Branch, Ontario Department of Public Works, 1920, 49.

⁶³ M.P. Marchak, "The Canadian Labour Force: Jobs for Women," in M. Stephenson, ed., *Women in Canada* (Toronto 1977), 148.

⁶⁴ MacMurchy, *The Canadian Girl at Work*, 15.

⁶⁵ For some of the debate which surrounded this programme see "University Women in the Business World," *Financial Post*, 24 December 1926, 10 and the arguments between Margaret Thompson, head of Western's Department of Secretarial Science, "Pays to Use Best in Buying Brains" and Mrs. E. Cooper, Chief of Stenographic Division of Maclean Publishing, "College Training Not Key to Success," *Ibid.*, 10-11.

service. Traditional stereotypes were then dusted off to justify restrictions on women's "unseemly" progress.⁶⁶ The federal government went so far as to institutionalize discrimination when it allowed the Civil Service Commission to restrict competitions on the basis of sex in 1918. Veterans need not worry that there would be no place for them.⁶⁷ Ottawa's long-time policy of equal pay for equal work was meaningless because it never offered women equal opportunities. Equality was still further undercut in 1921 by stringent regulations on the hiring of married women. In addition, a married woman might keep her existing post only if a real need for her particular services could be proven, a rather dubious proposition in the recession year, 1921. "Lucky" working wives were rehired as new and temporary appointees. Further penalized, they sacrificed all former seniority and were paid the minimum rate in their classification. Not surprisingly, the number of women in federal and provincial employment in Ottawa dropped 13.2 per cent from 4,296 in 1921 to 3,729 in 1931. It is unlikely that this decline was due solely to economic stringency since male civil servants jumped from 6,080 in 1921 to 6,466 ten years later, a gain of 6.5 per cent.

As Table II shows, the generally gloomy picture was reaffirmed by wage discrimination. Between 1921 and 1931 women earned on average 54 to 60 per cent of male wages. The contrast is all the more striking when individual occupational categories are considered. In 1921 women's wages as a percentage of men's exceeded 50 per cent in only two employments. By the next census this had climbed to a mere four. As usual the largest single employer of women — personal service — was by far the worst in each year. The situation in manufacturing was almost as bad, a fact which helps explain industrial militancy. In contrast, the rather better record of white collar jobs could be interpreted as progress, of a sort.

The wage situation was not standardized across the Dominion. Employers in eastern cities tended to be rather more discriminatory than those in the west.⁶⁸ In 1921, for instance, gainfully employed females in Calgary were considerably better off than their counterparts in Quebec City. As can be seen from Table III below, this pattern also held true ten years later. Why this was so owes something to many factors, including regional and urban variations, the number of low paid nuns, the range of occupational choice, the character of the industrial structure and the proportion of women in the local population.

⁶⁶ For an illustration of such stereotypes see R.M. Dawson, *The Civil Service of Canada* (London 1929).

⁶⁷ There were comparable efforts after World War Two. See R. Pierson, "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Labour Force in WWII," *CHA Historical Papers* (1976), 141-73.

⁶⁸ This general trend is an extension of the pattern already observed for Montreal and Toronto in the important study by Marie Lavigne and Jennifer Stoddart, "Analyse du travail féminin à Montréal entre les deux guerres," Thèse de la Maîtrise en Arts (Histoire), Université de Québec à Montréal, 1973, ch. V.

Table II

Women's Annual Wages as a Proportion of Men's in Various Occupational Categories, 1921 and 1931

	1921	1931
All Occupations	54%	60%
Manufacturing	43	44
Transportation & Communication	54	63
Trade	44	40
Finance, Insurance Service	44	52
Professional	39	33
Personal	47	43
Laundering, Cleaning, Dyeing	40	38
Clerical	—	58
	63	71

SOURCE: Canada, Census, 1921 and 1931.

Table III

Women's Annual Wages as a Proportion of Men's in Selected Cities of Population 30,000 and over, for 1921 and 1931

	1921	1931
Halifax	50%	51%
St. John	52	55
Quebec	39	39
Montreal	54	56
Ottawa	51	55
Toronto	58	59
Hamilton	51	59
London	49	54
Windsor	60	72
Winnipeg	55	56
Regina	58	57
Calgary	59	60
Edmonton	59	58
Vancouver	66	69

SOURCE: Canada, Census, 1931.

Women did not in every case receive their devastatingly lower wages because they worked any less time. Their work week, especially in blue collar jobs, regularly stretched beyond 40 or 48 hours without overtime. The only consolation was some women's ability to work more steadily. In 1921, for instance, the average female worker was employed just over a week longer a year than the male; in 1931 something like 5.5 weeks longer. Significantly, as Table IV also demonstrates, there were substantial variations from the average. Women in many employments including manufacturing worked much the same hours as their male co-workers. For them the situation was especially disheartening.

Table IV

Average Number of Weeks Worked in 1921 and 1931, by Sex and Occupational Category

	1921		1931	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
All Occupations	46.45	48.27	41.07	46.59
Manufacturing	45.95	45.31	41.70	42.18
Transportation & Communication	47.27	49.00	44.40	48.83
Trade	49.32	48.23	47.34	45.83
Finance, Insurance	50.58	49.78	49.15	49.12
Service	49.01	48.90	47.16	47.54
Professional	49.79	49.48	49.01	49.65
Personal	47.84	48.61	44.79	46.70
Laundering, Cleaning & Dyeing	—	—	41.77	45.53
Clerical	49.53	49.54	48.01	48.20

SOURCE: Canada, Census, 1931.

As Table V shows, gainfully employed women on average experienced a drop in dollar income between 1921 and 1931. The range between the highest wage sector, finance and insurance and the lowest, personal service, meant an immense difference in life-style and expectation. The former at \$18.87 a week in 1921 and \$24.54 a week in 1931 was safely above the cost of the bare necessities estimated for a Toronto saleswoman in 1921 at \$12.56 a week or \$653.25 a year and in 1930 at \$12.50 and \$653.00.⁶⁹ In contrast, personal service was abysmal at \$6.27 weekly in 1921 and \$5.69 ten years later. Even the figure for Toronto was meagre. In 1929 the Employed Girls' Council of

⁶⁹ First Annual Report of the Ontario Minimum Wage Board, SPO, #73, 1921, 6.

Regina raised the required minimum to \$20 a week by including allowances for loss of time, holidays, other unexpected costs and savings for unemployment and old age.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, if women could maintain their wage levels, some improvement occurred during the decade in terms of real wages. The cost of living index dropped from 132.3 (100 = 1935-39) in December 1921 to 109.9 in December 1931.⁷¹ Nevertheless even a deflationary trend could not make the lives of most working women approach comfort and security.⁷²

Table V

Average Annual Wages for Women in Various Occupational Categories in 1921 and 1931

	1921	1931
All Occupations	\$573.	\$ 559.
Manufacturing	504.	472.
Transportation & Communication	675.	701.
Finance, Insurance	981.	1275.
Trade	591.	561.
Service	482.	467.
Professional	775.	853.
Personal	326.	296.
Laundering, Cleaning, Dyeing	—	448.
Clerical	785.	832.

SOURCE: Canada, Census, 1931.

Opportunities and wages were not the only means by which the community reflected its different views of men and women. Since most women were routinely socialized from infancy to accept male leadership, discipline and assistance, it was hardly surprising that the workplace often echoed the assumption of deference and dependence. The special restraints and expectations women laboured under in both blue and white collar employments were also reminiscent, to some degree, of the traditional family economy of the

⁷⁰ *Labour Gazette* (April 1929), 407.

⁷¹ The number of women who were forced into prostitution, part-time or full-time, as a result of inadequate salaries is unknown. Some contemporaries did believe, however, that such a fate was not infrequent. See "The Life of Factory Girls. A Day's Impressions in Toronto," *Maritime Labour Herald*, 13 October 1923.

⁷² The number of women who were forced into prostitution, part-time or full-time, as a result of inadequate salaries is unknown. Some contemporaries did believe, however, that such a fate was not infrequent. See "The Life of Factory Girls. A Day's Impressions in Toronto," *Maritime Labor Herald*, 13 October 1923.

pre-industrial world.⁷³ This economy encouraged employers to act paternalistically towards all employees. Female workers in particular were to be chaperoned and disciplined by bosses as by fathers.⁷⁴ This tradition acted in concert with up-to-date socialization practices to distinguish women's experience of the workplace.

Women's morality occupied a special place in new and traditional attitudes. Domestic service came specially recommended owing to the supposed superiority and safety of domestic life. The regular imposition of early curfews on domestic servants, for instance, could be defended as pseudo-parental discipline. Louis Guyon, the chief factory inspector for Quebec, reiterated the familiar dreary justification for greater protection for female factory hands by pointing to the "objectionable and constant promiscuous contact with the workmen who [sic] no factory rule can fully control."⁷⁵ Among Guyon's colleagues, however, the more modern attitudes of co-workers like Louisa King were slowly gaining ground. She concluded "after many years experience that young girls working in factories are not more exposed in regard to their morals than are those who do other work for a living."⁷⁶ Unlike Guyon she felt confident that "modern" training had produced girls who, if not ladies, were at least ladylike. Guyon continued, nevertheless, to find sympathizers among certain employers who were determined to remain stern, if self-serving, guardians. In January 1921, for instance, the Atlantic Underwear Company of Moncton, New Brunswick, opened an "apartment house to accommodate one hundred of their female operatives . . . at a nominal cost."⁷⁷ The exact intentions of the firm are obscure but one may well suppose that charity, efficiency and morality were all to be served.

In Quebec the power of the Roman Catholic Church sometimes resulted in more traditional methods of ensuring an obedient labour force. In a Montreal cigar factory the inculcation of proper attitudes clearly included a conspicuous degree of religious control.

When you get used to noise and look around a little closer, you notice statues in the corners of the rooms. You wonder if the boss is such a lover of art that he wants to

⁷³ Women's work in the pre-industrial community most often took place in the context of the patriarchal family, her own or her master's. This family model with its implicit provision for physical and moral protection shaped the attitudes of early factory owners to their girls workers. See, for instance, J.W. Scott, Louise A. Tilly, "Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17 (1975), 53.

⁷⁴ For a good example of this type of discipline see G. Kealey, ed., *Canada Investigates Industrialism* (Toronto 1973), 222-232.

⁷⁵ "Report of Mr. Louis Guyon," Annual Report of the Quebec Department of Public Works and Labour, 1918, 75.

⁷⁶ Mrs. Louisa King, *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁷ *Labour Gazette* (February 1921), 131. See also "A Community House for Women Workers," *Financial Post*, 22 October 1920.

always gaze at beauty. You look again at the statues, you notice they are statues of saints and religious heroes.

For a minute you imagine yourself back in the middle ages when the priesthood were [sic] so powerful that they wanted the mass to constantly gaze and think only of holy emblems and figures, to keep them meek and docile. . . . Very often do the priests come down during working hours and speak to the girls. Of course, everybody must stop working, but what does the boss care about that, as it is piece work.⁷⁸

As this remark suggests, submission to male authority (here the Church) always occupied a large part of any proposed morality for women. A further aspect of this same discipline system included the regular docking of pay for petty infringements of regulations, for a few minutes' tardiness or miniscule errors. These punishments appear to have been employed more often with females than males, a reflection both of women's relative weakness and of a persistent difference in bosses' attitudes to female workers.

Blue collar workers were not alone in meriting special attention as women. Female employees in a variety of occupations seem to have inspired many early experiments in welfare capitalism.⁷⁹ Some of these modern initiatives offered real advantages. Telephone companies and larger retail outlets often pioneered in setting up recreational, health and welfare plans. During their extensive expansion in the decade Eatons' maintained Eatons' Welfare Secretaries, motherly women, to supervise the well-being of female help and in 1927 opened the Christie Street Recreation Area for its Toronto "girls."⁸⁰ In addition to assisting badly paid workers, such plans yielded obvious public relations benefits and undercut the appeal of unions. In most cases women had to demonstrate respectability in order to gain "perks." "Some stores," for example, would "not employ any person who paints, powders, chews gum or smokes cigarettes."⁸¹ In keeping with this, guidance manuals stressed the centrality of deferential behaviour and attractive looks for young job-seekers. This is not to suggest that good grooming and an agreeable manner were insignificant for male applicants but that such qualities were not, as with women, emphasized to the near exclusion of competence.

Much of the feminist movement flourished on the expectation of the imminent birth of a technocratic, truly meritocratic society, in which the historical inequality of women would finally give way to genuine equality of opportunity in the work place. Such hopes and expectations were bolstered by a temporary illusion of progress when the burgeoning corporate and state bureaucracies of

⁷⁸ "Conditions in a Cigar Factory in Montreal," Working Women's Section, *The Worker*, 24 October 1925.

⁷⁹ See Nelson, *Managers and Workers*, 111.

⁸⁰ Unfortunately no critical history of Eaton's and its labour policies yet exists. It is possible, however, to read hagiographic accounts such as W. Stephenson, *The Store that Timothy Built* (Toronto 1969) for the details which will allow a more critical analysis of its development. On the 1920s, see especially ch. 3.

⁸¹ *Vocational Opportunities in the Industries of Ontario*, 9.

the 1920s fleshed out their lower reaches with thousands of female wage labourers. Only years of direct experience of frustrated upward mobility would teach feminists that the entry of women into the ranks of the intermediate status white collar groups could not of itself transform the sexist discrimination which lay at the heart of the male-controlled capitalist system. The longer and more intimate familiarity of blue collar women with unequal opportunities and wages brought the lesson home somewhat sooner, for some at least, that paid work is not necessarily liberating.

III

RECOGNITION of injustice drove more and more women to investigate alternatives to continued oppression within the labour market. A number turned to collective action. Unfortunately, the 1920s were not propitious for unions.⁸² Hounded by unsympathetic governments, antagonistic employers and unfavourable economic trends, organized labour was unable to offer much assistance to a group which it had traditionally neglected. Although many unionists worried that "women's physiological handicaps make them more subject than men to the new strain of industry,"⁸³ they also concluded that women were nearly unorganizable. Not only were women likely to desert the labour force, they did "not seem to possess that spirit of solidarity, characteristic of men in industry."⁸⁴ Such assumptions so exaggerated differences between male and female workers that even when women proved loyal recruits, they frequently won little encouragement from male organizers.⁸⁵ The views of the newly established *Confédération des travailleurs catholiques du Canada* that working women deprived deserving family heads of jobs and that women had but a doubtful claim to a voice in its deliberations were somewhat extreme.⁸⁶ Skepticism, together with fears of female competitors, however, strengthened secular groups like the Journeymen Barbers International Union of America in rejecting female applicants.

The weakness of women's position was sometimes evident in work contracts. The 1921 agreement between the Merchant Tailors of Sault Ste. Marie

⁸² See S. Jamieson, *Times of Trouble* (Ottawa 1968), ch. IV.

⁸³ W. Tite, "Married Women in Industry." *Canadian Congress Journal* (October 1924), 41.

⁸⁴ H.A. Spence, "Minimum Wage Laws for Women," *Ibid.* (March 1925), 37.

⁸⁵ See, for instance, the experience of Pauline Newman, Fannia Cohn and Rose Pesotta (who organized for the International Lady Garment Workers in Canada) in Alice Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and their Union," *Labor History*, 17 (1976), 5-23.

⁸⁶ See Lavigne and Stoddart, "Ouvrières et travailleuses," 141 and the discussion over whether women should be permitted on committees in "Fourth Convention of National and Catholic Unions," *Labour Gazette* (October 1921), 1262-7. On the slow shift in attitudes by the successor of the Catholic body, the *Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux*, see Mona Josée Gagnon, *Les Femmes vues par le Québec des hommes* (Montreal 1974), ch. 6.

and the Journeymen Tailors' Union of America Local 73, which stated that "Women [were] to be paid the scale as men for the same class of work,"⁸⁷ was unusual. Much more frequent was explicit provision for unequal rates as with the 1924 contract between "certain local employers" and the International Brotherhood of Bookbinders Local 147 in Victoria which guaranteed journeymen a minimum wage of \$42 a week and journeywomen a relatively miserly \$21 for the same hours.⁸⁸ Whatever their sympathies or awareness of the danger of wage undercutting, unionists in this decade were rarely able to reject discriminatory clauses. Craft unions, in particular, with their traditional interest in skilled workers, were ill-equipped to deal with large numbers in industries like textiles, shoes and clothing, not to mention newcomers in the white collar trades. Industrial unions were often the answer but they too found organizing women hard-going.

Even such radical publications as the *BC Federationist* (Vancouver), *One Big Union Bulletin* (Winnipeg), *The Western Labor News* (Winnipeg), *The Worker* (Toronto) and the *Maritime Labor Herald* (Gloucester Bay) devoted few pages to female labour. Too often they consoled themselves piously that "Unless we are very much mistaken, class consciousness will spread amongst our female wage slave comrades with startling rapidity."⁸⁹ As yet far too little is known about the influence of radical leaders and associations such as Elizabeth Hall Gaud, Annie Buller, Florence Custance, Rebecca Buhay, the Women's Labor League and the United Women's Educational Federation of Ontario. Although it is impossible to evaluate their impact on working women, their work may well have helped groom women to assume a greater role in organizational activity in the 1930s.⁹⁰ In addition, the acceptance of powerful female leaders like Bella Gaud by the Communist Party and others was a visible symbol of women's increasing importance to any who aimed to mobilize the Canadian working class.

Although the union record was generally depressing, industrial unions such as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union of America (ILGWA), the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACW) and the Industrial Union of Needle Trades made noteworthy efforts to rally women, especially in Toronto, Montreal and Winnipeg. The strike records of the federal Department of Labour reveal women repeatedly walking out in demands for union shop and better wages and protests against violation of contract and speedup, piecework

⁸⁷ *Labour Gazette* (March 1921), 418.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* (February 1924), 170-1.

⁸⁹ "Woman Rules," *The Worker*, 14 November 1929.

⁹⁰ Unfortunately no critical assessment exists of any of these individuals or groups. The hagiographic treatments by Catherine Vance of Bella Hall Gaud, *Not by Gods but by People* (Toronto 1968) and Louise Watson of Annie Buller, *She Never was Afraid* (Toronto 1976) do suggest, however, how central a role such women played in the Canadian Communist Party.

and contract shops.⁹¹ Union problems were tremendous, not least being the need to operate in a variety of languages. Indeed ethnic loyalties were a constantly divisive force among women as well as men labourers.⁹² In addition, organization drives almost invariably roused in their wake the proliferation of "contract," sometimes referred to as "bedroom" or "social," shops. Union leaders recognized bitterly that there was

really no front upon which these smaller establishments may be attacked. The active owners, usually skilled men, engage their sisters, brothers, mothers, children, sweethearts and other kin and make the entire scheme a kind of community shop, although it is usually reinforced by outsiders.⁹³

Unions were undercut in still other ways. Some entrepreneurs like Lippe and Gariepy, a men's clothing firm in Montreal, retaliated by "simply moving our factory to Joliette [a smaller town] because the situation caused by the union is so unbearable that we are compelled to go outside the city if we mean to stay in business . . ."⁹⁴ Not all operators chose to pack up. Scabs and private guards remained popular alternatives. In some cases police joined forces with employers. In 1925, for instance, Mary McNab of the ILGWA, addressed the Toronto Trades and Labour Council and "denounced heartily a certain sergeant of police . . . who when she went forth to hold a meeting, threatened to give her a ride as a 'vag' — and had six huge policemen and two plainclothesmen follow her everywhere she went."⁹⁵ Such harassment often led to arrests. The 1926 ACW strike against the Society Brand Clothing Company in Montreal provides one typical example. Four teenagers — Rose Chernoff 18, Dinah Chernoff 17, Annie Saxe 16 and Yetta Demsky 16 — were charged with assaulting an arresting constable.⁹⁶

Young female clothing workers were not alone in their use of militant trade union action, yet such tactics remained, as with men, the exclusive preserve of blue collar, manual workers. Clerical and sales employees suffered from an absence of almost any organizational tradition whatsoever. A large reservoir of potential employees made secretaries and saleswomen naturally reluctant to appear troublesome. At the same time the fact that their work was frequently a

⁹¹ This is in sharp contrast to the relative passivity depicted in Suzanne Cross, "The Neglected Majority: The Changing Role of Women in 19th Century Montreal," in S.M. Trofimenkoff and A. Prentice, eds., *The Neglected Majority* (Toronto 1977).

⁹² See, for instance, Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable."

⁹³ Public Archives of Canada (henceforth PAC), Department of Labour Papers (henceforth DLP), v. 329, folder 22(66), clipping, "6000 Clothing Workers to Lay Down Needles in Friendly Warning," *Montreal Star*, 11 July 1922.

⁹⁴ PAC, DLP, v. 333, folder 24(81), S. Gariepy to Deputy Minister of Labour, 29 December 1924.

⁹⁵ PAC, DLP, v. 334, folder 24(11), "Score King Government," *Toronto Telegram*, 6 February 1925.

⁹⁶ PAC, DLP, v. 337, folder 26(63), "Union Workers Appear in Court," *Montreal Star*, 20 July 1926.

clear step above — in terms of safety, cleanliness and respectability — that previously offered female wage earners made them still more unlikely activists.

All across the nation, however, female manual workers, alone and in concert with men, withdrew their services in the 1920s. The issues at stake ranged widely, from the demand for a union contract by male and female employees of the City Café in Calgary in 1923, wage disagreements between telephone operators and the Maritime Telephone Company in Halifax in 1925, the discharge of a popular foreman in an Hamilton knitting factory in 1928 to the demand that "things . . . be like they were before the efficiency experts came along and changed them" in Hamilton's Canadian Cottons Ltd. in 1929.⁹⁷ Although men were most conspicuous in the labour battles of the decade, it was not uncommon to discover newspapers branding women as "the chief offenders."⁹⁸ The visibility of the less numerous female strikers was high because they challenged the prevailing image of female normality.

Sabotage and pamphlet distribution were regular tactics, but women's participation took other forms as the following two strikes illustrate. The first occurred in Stratford from August to October of 1921. After two years' effort the United Textile Workers of America felt strong enough to support the female work force in a strike against the Avon Hosiery Company. The issues were higher wages, specifically a minimum wage of \$12.50 a week, the elimination of bonusing and recognition of the union. The employer had attempted to head off the Textile Workers by setting up a company union, but this plan collapsed. After a carefully supervised election, the manager confessed that "When we came to count the ballots we found that so many . . . had either been put in blank or mutilated it was impossible for us to decide who this committee [of workers' representatives] should be . . ."⁹⁹ Admitting that it lacked "the loyalty and cooperation of our present employees,"¹⁰⁰ Avon mounted an attack, giving the girls one minute "to sever affiliation with the Union or get out."¹⁰¹ At that point the new unionists struck. Matters further deteriorated when fifteen girls were arrested on picket duty. Two were so young that they had to be transferred to Juvenile Court. At the end of September a sympathy meeting at Stratford's Majestic Theatre elicited widespread support from local unionists including the Trades and Labour Council which was providing financial assistance to the hard-pressed women. As winter approached, however, the situation deterio-

⁹⁷ PAC, DLP, v. 332, folder 23(97); v. 335, folder 25(53); v. 341, folder 28(106); v. 342, folder 29(4), "Strikers Still Out: Pickets on Duty at Plant," *Hamilton Spectator*, 1 February 1929.

⁹⁸ PAC, DLP, v. 338, folder 26(79), "Strikers Are Hurt in Fight," *Free Press* (Winnipeg), 27 October 1926.

⁹⁹ PAC, DLP, v. 328, folder 20(331), W. Pearson to Deputy Minister of Labour, 18 September 1920.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, "Statement to Employees," 31 August 1920.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, "Statement from Mrs. L. Tuff," 13 September 1920.

rated. After the intervention of a federal mediator the strike was settled largely on the company's terms on 20 October. Avon agreed to reinstate all strikers without discriminating against unionists, but it refused to recognize the Textile Workers. The firm, however, later asserted that economic conditions made it unable to rehire everyone and those with least seniority were released. No agreement was reached on wage increases; the strike had failed.

A similar situation occurred three years later in Hull, Quebec. In fall 1924 the E.B. Eddy Match Company issued an ultimatum to women returning after some weeks unpaid "holiday" while the plant underwent repairs. The workers were handed "yellow dog" contracts repudiating unions and informed of the decision to fire forewomen, leaving moral authority and, more importantly perhaps, chances of promotion in the hands of men alone. Rejection was immediate and spontaneous. Under the leadership of forewomen, "Girls gather[ed] near the Eddy Company offices and plant . . . to prevent their former co-workers from signing such forms."¹⁰² Although the girls were affiliated with the Confédération des travailleurs catholiques, the union received no prior warning of the walkout. Upon notification, the conservative confessional syndicate appeared most concerned because foremen meant "morals will not be safeguarded . . ."¹⁰³ Unfortunately, it is difficult to know just how important the women considered this "moral question." Nevertheless this issue provoked more widespread support than would have been the case if solely economic considerations had been involved.

Eddy Match attempted to outflank the women and their allies by shifting operations to its Deseronto plant. Workers gave little sign of intimidation. On the contrary, they took the initiative, grappling with the manager as he crept back into the factory. There

he was seized by several score of his former employees, mostly girls, and was forcibly prevented from doing so. . . . He returned at 9:30, and when he was seen by the girl strikers a shout went up. There was a concentrated rush for the superintendent. He was pushed, pulled and jostled. . . . During the rush he was struck.¹⁰⁴

The company retaliated by hiring scabs. Not long afterwards, however, a settlement was negotiated. E.B. Eddy gave a verbal promise to rehire forewomen and permit union activity. Once in operation it reneged on both pledges. At the close of a bitter struggle the matchwomen, like the textile workers earlier, had little to show for their efforts.

Such setbacks appear increasingly common as the decade progressed. According to the files of the federal Department of Labour most strikes were only partially successful at best. Too frequently unions went unrecognized,

¹⁰² PAC, DLP, v. 333, folder 24(64), "Refused to Sign Forms Presented" *Ottawa Journal*, 27 September 1924.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, "National Catholic Central Trades and Labour Council."

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, "Match Factory Head Given a Warm Reception by Girls and Kept from Eddy Plant," *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 20 October 1924.

complaints about rates and machinery unremedied and scabs undeterred. Although reports were notoriously incomplete, the Labour Department's assessment of the *total* male and female membership of the Boot and Shoe Workers' Union (1,127), the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (6,300), the International Fur Workers' Union (600), the United Garment Workers of America (1,218), the International Lady Garment Workers (656), the Hotel and Restaurant International Alliance and Bartenders' International League of America (1,138), the Retail Clerks' International Protective Association (100), the United Textile Workers of America (80) and the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers of Canada (1,200) in 1929 did little to exaggerate how bad times were for unions, particularly in employments where there were significant numbers of women.¹⁰⁵ This unpromising situation underlay women's search for more congenial environments.

Women's experience of a discriminatory workplace was shaped, inevitably, by the expectation that they, like the great majority would marry and subsequently escape the paid work force. In the 1920s this expectation was reinforced by increasingly powerful mass media which celebrated the importance of love and marriage for women.¹⁰⁶ The celebrated goal of marriage did not require that women accept a femininity which emphasized passivity and patience.¹⁰⁷ Just as many rejected domestic service in part because the middle-class house isolated them from potential suitors, they were just as capable of taking concrete steps to find a husband. Dancing the Blackbottom and the Charleston the night through, girls might not only forget the frustrations of earning their daily bread but possibly encounter new boyfriends.¹⁰⁸ Warding off the dreariness of factory and shop life, they built private dreams in discussing "dress and boys and movies all day long."¹⁰⁹ At length released, "at night the girls all fix themselves up, the paint and powder is put on thick, and they pretend not to be working girls."¹¹⁰ Such girls were active participants in the marriage market. For the great majority marriage was the sole possibility they had of offsetting

¹⁰⁵ Canada. Department of Labour, *Statistics*, 1929, 67-8.

¹⁰⁶ See the description of the female types in Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape. The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York 1974), ch. 2 and Alexander Walker, *Sex in the Movies* (Harmondsworth 1968). For a useful Canadian study see M. Vipond, "The Image of Women in Mass Circulation Magazines in the 1920s," in *The Neglected Majority*.

¹⁰⁷ The question of what constituted "femininity" for working-class women is difficult since few records from the women themselves survive. The "structural" approach suggested by W. Roberts, *Honest Womanhood* (Toronto 1977) is valuable so long as it is remembered to include marital or family influences together with the "demographic and occupational" factors Roberts notes (5).

¹⁰⁸ For a moving description of this solution in an American setting see Wm. O'Neill, ed., "The Long Day," *Women at Work* (Chicago 1972).

¹⁰⁹ "In a Dress Factory," *The Worker*, 12 September 1925.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Compare this with a folk song heard in New York's sweatshops:

Day the same as night, night the same as

inequality in the workplace. Just as importantly it offered a focus for hopes which dead end jobs could not satisfy. To be sure marriage, childbirth and childcare might be painful and disillusioning but how much better were a woman's chances if she looked to weak, often sexist unions and an unequal place in the paid labour force? We need to examine very closely the argument that "Working-class women as a group never chose to make employment a primary means of identification in their lives."¹¹¹ Certainly in Canada in the 1920s the familiar lessons girls learned in the fine art of male seduction were as up-to-date and possibly a good deal more effective in securing the good things in life than any purely job-related skills.

IV

WOMEN'S plight in factory, office and store did not leave contemporaries unmoved. As we have seen some unions battled to improve conditions and female workers found private solutions. Efforts to promote women's welfare also came from governments. The special vulnerability of females had been acknowledged as early as the 1880s with the first factory acts in Quebec and Ontario. When Canada entered World War One, laws regulated hours and conditions of labour in industries and shops across the country. Some legislation responded to feminist criticism, some reflected the fears of progressive capitalists, but perhaps the majority was owed to the prevailing consensus that future mothers needed additional protection.¹¹² In any case most such legislation acknowledged female inferiority much more than it aimed at its elimination. The series of laws which established minimum wage guidelines for women was in the mainstream of this tradition. The very fact of their implementation acknowledged women's vulnerable and subordinate role in the market place. Nothing occurred in the 1920s to render them superfluous.

day.

And all I do is sew and sew and sew

May God help me and my love come

soon

That I might leave this work and go.

(Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable," 7)

Such Jewish folksongs were doubtless common in Canada.

¹¹¹ Patricia Branca, "A New Perspective on Women's Work: A Comparative Typology," *Journal of Social History*, 9 (1975), 147. This readjustment in focus for the study of working women is part of an increased awareness that working people live lives distinct from the traditional accounts of labour unions and political parties. For women in particular this meant lives more closely tied to family demands and cycles. See the introduction to R.G. Hann, et al., *Primary Sources in Canadian Working Class History 1860-1930* (Kitchener 1973) for a reminder of the need for a "new labour history."

¹¹² In the 1920s fears about the effect of paid work on a woman's ability to 'mother' were especially evident. See Strong-Boag, "'Wages for Housework: Mothers' Allowances and the Beginnings of Social Security in Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, (February 1979).

By the 1920s minimum wage legislation had a lengthy history beginning in New Zealand in 1894 and entering North America in Massachusetts in 1912. Conscious of the Versailles Peace Treaty's espousal of a "living wage," Canada's Royal Commission on Industrial Relations recommended minimum wage legislation for women and labourers in 1919. The National Industrial Conference held in Ottawa in the same year reaffirmed that recommendation. In 1920 the Nova Scotia Commission on the Hours of Labour, Wages and Working Conditions of Women Employed in Industrial Occupations recognized "that if we are to have a healthy virile race, it is of primary importance to preserve the homes and conserve the health, morals and efficiency of that large class of women dependent on their daily wage for a living."¹¹³ The developing consensus on this issue was reflected in regulations setting minimum wage for women in Alberta in 1917, in Manitoba and BC in 1918, in Quebec and Saskatchewan in 1919 and in Nova Scotia and Ontario in 1920.

Feminists like BC's Helen Gregory McGill and Ontario's Lydia M. Parsons joined Minimum Wage Commissions in order to superintend one part of that brave new world their movement hoped to usher in. Ontario's Commission identified not only what spirit it believed lay at the heart of the new legislation but the spirit which all liberal reformers wished to see govern modern economic life: "This principle is the right of the worker to live from her work. It asserts the value and dignity of human life within the industrial sphere."¹¹⁴

More than idealism, however, had brought the minimum wage laws into being. Down-to-earth convictions were also crucial. Defending his work, the first chairman of Ontario's Minimum Wage Commission argued forcefully:

Wages here and there are unsocially low, representing a pathological condition in business. The function of minimum wage administration is to correct these unwholesome aberrations from the prevailing standards.¹¹⁵

The time had come to eliminate "shyster," "indifferent" and "negligent" employers who brought with them "incoherent and inexplicable diversity."¹¹⁶ Insisting that no general increase of wages was intended, the chairman clearly believed that minimum wage legislation was working with "good" businessmen everywhere to rid the community of the small minority of bad corporate citizens. In this way "minimum wage administration" would guarantee "industrial peace."¹¹⁷ The Quebec division of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association and others of the same mind were reassured by promises that "nothing would be done under the act which would in any way disturb the

¹¹³ Nova Scotia. Royal Commission . . . 1920, 6.

¹¹⁴ Annual Report of the Minimum Wage Commission of Ontario, SPO, #73, 1921, 5.

¹¹⁵ J.W. Macmillan, "Minimum Wage Administration," *American Economic Review*, 18 (1928), 248. Compare these arguments with similar ones presented in the state of New York in the 1930s, R.P. Ingalls, "New York and the Minimum Wage Movement, 1933-1937," *Labor History*, 15 (1974), 179-198.

¹¹⁶ Macmillan, "Minimum Wage," 250.

¹¹⁷ Annual Report of the Minimum Wage Board of Ontario, SPO, #89, 1923, 21.

industrial activities of the province."¹¹⁸ The cautious handling of the business community by governments reflected the ambiguity which surrounded the legislation. While its very necessity implicitly indicated prevailing business practices, it at the same time depended for its success on cooperation from the offending class of capitalist employers.

Continuing mistrust on the part of this powerful group helps explain why, although all the provinces except PEI and New Brunswick had minimum wage on their books early in the decade, Nova Scotia did not set up a Board until 1930 and Quebec did not appoint a commission until 1927. Nor were commissions as strong as radical reformers might have preferred. While there was considerable variation in the size, makeup and authority of provincial minimum wage commissions, all suffered from inadequate staffs and budgets. For all such critical handicaps, they were given an awesomely wide mandate: to set wages for both experienced and inexperienced female workers in most employments with the conspicuous and damning exception in all provinces of domestic servants, farm labourers and bank employees. Inclusion of the first two was regarded as both political suicide and administrative nightmare. The latter escaped surveillance due to provincial inability to regulate establishments operating under federal banking legislation. Wage orders were based on a hypothetical budget for an average single working woman in the occupation concerned. Separate orders were required for each industry which often occasioned substantial delays in extending the legislation. All provinces except Quebec eventually assigned commissions the complementary power to dictate the maximum number of working hours. Rates and hours were generally fixed in consultation with representatives from the public, the employers and the employees.

The acts of the provincial commissions were largely limited to urban areas and occupations. Even then mandated wages for the same job often differed from city to city and province to province. In addition, the minimum could vary tremendously within a single industry. In Montreal in 1928-9 females in the boot, shoe and leather trades might receive from \$7.00 to over \$12.50 a week depending upon experience. In the same year the weekly minimum for women in the telephone and telegraph field in BC ranged from \$11.00 to \$15.00 per week.¹¹⁹ Not unexpectedly such variation made supervision all the more difficult.

The precise level at which wages should be fixed provoked acrimonious debate right from the beginning. Commissions constantly encountered employers who argued "that the hours of labour should be determined by the state of the trade"¹²⁰ or "that most of their employees were not self-supporting,

¹¹⁸ *Labour Gazette* (July 1925), 647.

¹¹⁹ Annual Report of the Quebec Department of Public Works and Labour, 1928-9, 71; Annual Report of the BC Department of Labour, 1929.

¹²⁰ Annual Report of the BC Department of Labour, 1928, 47.

but lived with their parents, and were not under such heavy expenses."¹²¹ Opposition to guidelines included the threat to replace women by boys and men.¹²² There were also cases "where employees have been recommended by the inspector for an increase and have been dismissed in consequence."¹²³

Revealing its half-hearted acceptance by the business community, efforts to avoid the legislation were all too common. Over-worked and understaffed, government inspectors could only give cursory and infrequent attention to the great majority of establishments within their jurisdiction. At times it must have been only too easy to accept employers' assurances and explanations. Reform was a tedious and exhausting business for even the stout-hearted. Whatever their personal doubts, however, inspectors persisted in chronicling a wide range of abuses beginning with the failure to display minimum wage rates on the premises. Reluctance to abide by the legislation sometimes took imaginative forms. The BC Department of Labour ran into pseudo-schools which claimed "to teach some industry or occupation," often with tuition fees.¹²⁴ Employees in a barber "school" were typical victims; they collected only a percentage of what customers paid, an amount rarely equal to the minimum wage.¹²⁵ The continuing shift to piecework and subcontracting in many trades throughout the decade made wage rates all the more difficult to calculate and enforce. Unfortunately, redress was not easy even when offenders were identified. In most provinces it remained the victims' responsibility to sue for back wages. Such a recourse could be intimidating, not to mention expensive. Matters were improved when Ontario and BC began collecting arrears but even then retaliation was an ever-present fear.¹²⁶ The situation was particularly desperate for newcomers whose limited understanding of local customs and language made them prime targets for exploitation.¹²⁷ Since fines were relatively low (in 1929 a \$50 maximum in Quebec and \$100 in Saskatchewan), employers had all the more incentive to avoid directives.

Offenders were of every type, but largely Canadian-born Minimum Wage Commissioners often claimed to discover a similarity among them. Not untypical was the BC report in 1929 which characterized such "deviants" as "usually foreigners, or owners of businesses, who through lack of systematic manage-

¹²¹ "Minimum Wages for Women in British Columbia in 1923," *Labour Gazette* (September 1924), 76.

¹²² See Annual Report of the BC Department of Labour, 1919, 88, and the accusation in "Winnipeg Firm Employs Youths at \$4 per Week," *OBV Bulletin*, 5 February 1925, 1.

¹²³ Annual Report of the Saskatchewan Bureau of Labour and Industries, 1928, 39.

¹²⁴ Annual Report of the BC Department of Labour, 1924, 51.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1925, 50.

¹²⁶ See the retaliation cases cited in Annual Report of the BC Department of Labour, 1929, 55-7.

¹²⁷ See the examples cited in Annual Report of the Saskatchewan Bureau of Labour and Industries, 1928.

ment, can see no way to reduce their overhead expenses except by cutting wages."¹²⁸ The elimination of the "unCanadian" and the inefficient would restore occupations, so it was hoped, to their rightful condition of equity. Guidelines would enlighten, discipline and, in a word, modernize out-of-step employers without bringing businessmen as a group into disrepute. Such reasoning helped commissioners come to terms with the contradictions of a capitalist economy. Lest they shift attention from the individual offender to the system itself the commissions everywhere were reluctant to prosecute illegal operators in the courts in the 1920s.¹²⁹

The commissions' success was a matter of some debate even in the post-war decade. Many critics believed that the rates themselves were insufficient for a decent standard of living. Father Léon Lébel testifying before the House of Commons' Committee on Industrial and International Relations in 1929 condemned Quebec's model budget as "lower than [that of] any of the organizations which they had consulted."¹³⁰ The Alberta Federation of Labour criticized decisions taken after consultation with employers and wage-earners. Concluding that girls were too often intimidated in these conferences, the AFL pointed out that "The only cases where employees differed with their employers . . . were cases in which the employees were protected by being members of a trade union."¹³¹ The OBU's *Canadian Labor Advocate* was still more severe, charging that insufficient wage levels drove "women of the working class into prostitution . . ."¹³²

The base rate was not the sole flaw. A more serious difficulty lay in the permissible exceptions. Handicapped and aged workers could be exempted by permit; special permission could be granted for longer hours; and up to 50 per cent, and in some instances more, of the employees could be classified as "trainees" and thus liable to lower wages. It was only too easy for an unscrupulous employer to hire, fire and rehire workers to ensure their continued classification as apprentices.¹³³

Despite minimum wage legislation, the overall position of female workers remained poor. Abuses survived in a wide range of occupations. Government intervention could moderate unsatisfactory conditions but it rarely eliminated

¹²⁸ Quoted in "Minimum Wages for Women in British Columbia in 1929," *Labour Gazette*, (September 1930), 1031.

¹²⁹ See the Ontario Commission's refusal to prosecute a particularly grievous offender in "Attempts to Evade Minimum Wage Orders," *Labour Gazette* (November 1924), 913.

¹³⁰ Canada. House of Commons. Committee on Industrial and International Relations, *Report*, 1929, 10.

¹³¹ Cited in the "Legislative Programme of the Alberta Federation of Labour," *Labour Gazette*, (January 1924), 28.

¹³² "Crucifying Canadian Women," *Canadian Labor Advocate*, 27 November 1925.

¹³³ See the case cited in "Attempts to Evade Minimum Wage Orders," *Labour Gazette*, (November 1924), 913.

them completely. A young factory hand, testifying before the 1935 Royal Commission on Price Spreads, for instance, was asked "Do you know what the minimum wage was for experienced workers?" Her reply indicted Quebec's Wage Commission: "I do not know, I never heard about it."¹²⁴ Another study for the same commission discovered that minimum wage legislation had had little effect in the men's clothing industry.¹²⁵ Evidence on every side confirmed that piecework, contract shops and employer tactics often outmaneuvered even sincere efforts on the part of government investigators to bring about an improvement in working conditions or salaries.

Despite the generally sorry picture, there were gains. Wage standards, however inadequate, had been established. As the Commission on Price Spreads discovered in examining variety chain stores:

The variety chain evidence shows in an interesting way the effect of the absence of Minimum Wage Laws on sweated conditions. One chain operating across Canada paid 88 per cent of its full-time female clerks in the Maritime Provinces, and 72 per cent in Quebec below \$10 per week. There was no minimum wage order covering them at that time. In Ontario, the Prairie Provinces and British Columbia, where there were such orders, only 5, 3, and 0 per cent, respectively, of female clerks received below this figure.¹²⁶

Certain employers, humane, fair-minded or publicity-conscious, had been encouraged to raise wages. Some working women did collect back pay. While such benefits did not negate the continuing disadvantages facing women in a discriminatory labour market, they muted them.

In the 1920s single women became an acceptable part of the paid work force for all but the most reactionary. The welcome for married women was much less certain. In the final analysis acceptance of any kind was in large measure predicated on the continuation of women's inferiority in the labour force. Although some optimistic spirits anticipated that the disappearance of invidious distinctions between male and female labour was an inevitable outcome of modernization, discrimination found as comfortable a home as ever in the 1920s. Women had become merely the white collar privates and NCOs whose deferential support was an essential component of the new corporate state. Yet the seeds of some more critical reassessment of women's role in the workplace had also been sown. The all-too-familiar hardships of blue collar labour energized a new generation of women workers. Untouched by the glamourized optimism which so distorted understanding of work in offices and stores, some blue collar women took full measure of modern society and found it wanting. Over the long term their outrage would be essential in building a collective tradition of protest and in expanding women's awareness of their oppression. Not all of course had the strength, the stamina or the insight to

¹²⁴ Canada. Royal Commission . . . Price Spreads, *Evidence*, vol. 8, 4362.

¹²⁵ F.R. Scott, H.M. Cassidy, *Labour Conditions in the Men's Clothing Industry* (Toronto 1935), 48.

¹²⁶ Canada. Royal Commission . . . Price Spreads, *Report*, 1935, 122.

enter the struggle directly. Unknown numbers turned, as had their mothers and grandmothers, to marriage as the most accessible and attractive escape from bad jobs and bad bosses. Some female wage earners found limited relief in minimum wage legislation. No solution finally overcame the familiar disadvantages women encountered in the paid labour force. The "Girl of the New Day," wherever she toiled, soon discovered that she must wait still longer for a better dawn to break. In the 1920s sexist discrimination remained an integral feature of economic organization, however modern.



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