

RADICAL WOMEN IN ACTION--- THE CASE OF SEATTLE CITY LIGHT

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In the past year and a half, four members of Radical Women have been deeply involved in supporting and encouraging a mass employee movement at Seattle's publically-owned electrical utility.

In April, 1974 City Light workers embarked on a mass walk-out that lasted 11 days and involved 1400 out of 1700 employees. In June of 1974, City Light became the first utility to hire 10 women into the electrical trades through a special Affirmative Action training program. The movement born of the walk-out, and strengthened by the Electrical Trades Trainee training program for women, has fought the bosses at every turn for over a year, and this remarkably sustained struggle has presented many challenges to us as socialist-feminists.

We felt a deep responsibility to be examples of principled working-class militancy, to expose the class warfare that hides behind "labor-management relations", and to show that the way to win against the employer is through the class solidarity forged when privileged, white-male workers understand that they must support the demands of the lower-paid and lower-skilled workers, predominantly women and minorities, in their midst, in return for concerted action by the total workforce.

In the past several years, City Light employees, like most government workers, have been exposed to a close-up view of City government corruption and anti-labor bias.

The City Light walk-out was started by unionized male electrical workers predominantly white, in protest against two disciplinary suspensions and the militaristic "penal code" upon which the suspensions were based. Seven hundred I.B.E.W.* union members, needing support for their unauthorized strike, turned to the non-union City Light workers, including the low-paid, women office workers.

These women had previously experienced only sell-outs from the union leadership because of the union's refusal to expand to an industrial union concept which could have included women workers. One of our members at City Light, however, recognized the potential of the situation and actively organized in both groups -- the union membership and the women. She was militant and consistent in her stand on the issues and became a spokesperson for the entire body precisely because of this. She pointed out to union men that they couldn't win without earning the women's support, and she pointed out to the women that they couldn't win support for their demands for union membership unless they were also willing to act in solidarity with the men. The women demanded protection from the union in return for their prolonged participation in the walk-out, and in return the union membership pledged to defend the unorganized workers against any future reprisals.

*International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

Armed with this kind of solidarity, virtually everyone but the top level administrators and supervisors walked off the job.

At this point the walk-out became much more than a protest over an individual grievance -- it became a freedom struggle based on the principle of workers' intrinsic human right to be treated with dignity and respect. The power of this issue was manifest in its capacity to cut across and dissolve longstanding divisions among the workers. White men who had little previous experience with personal oppression on the job now could see with a broader vision. And the women, plunged into the forefront of the movement, were in a new position of power to push their demands. It was this solidarity that gave the struggle its dynamic and militancy, and which directly raised the issue of workers' power, in terms of workers' control over their management. The strikers demanded nothing less than the ouster of the City Light superintendent, and then, as the collusion of the mayor with superintendent became obvious, the workers promptly decided to initiate a campaign to recall the mayor!

Mass uprisings, by their very nature, bring together opposing political and social view-points. The walk-out at City Light was no exception. The strongest contradiction among the workers were between the worker-aristocracy on the one hand, and the union rank-and-file, minorities, and low-paid women workers on the other. Because most of the latter, especially the women, had little to lose materially, they were the most willing to fight and stay out until the demands of the walk-out were met. The union aristocracy, highly-paid, high seniority, union officers, lost their original militancy, however, when the bills for the houses, boats, and new cars began to stack up and hostilely retreated into their traditional, deep-seated conservatism. These older men sensed that the struggle had far surpassed the boundaries of their own narrow self-interests; afraid and resentful of the women in leadership and the radical demands of the rank-and-file, they engineered a plot to monopolize the microphones at a mass meeting on the 11th day and called for everyone to return to work -- or else, implying that they were returning at any cost.

Faced with this impossible split in the ranks, everyone did return to work, but we didn't go back empty-handed. An agreement was reached between the city and the City Light employees that gave us, as radicals, feminists, and militants, a forum with which to continue the struggle. The guts of the agreement established (1) a joint committee of employees and management representatives to write an Employee Bill of Rights and Responsibilities which would replace the fascistic disciplinary code, (2) a Public Review Committee to conduct open hearings on City Light management, and (3) a guarantee of no reprisals.

With the end of the walk-out, the most challenging period of the struggle began, when we, as radicals, had to help keep the movement alive after the exciting upsurge had died down. Our task became one of daily, consistent, and patient organizing on and off the job. We encouraged the newborn militants to maintain their momentum, to meet regularly and devise a structure for the new all-employee group, to keep fighting back against the continual attacks of management and to keep alive the basic ideals and program so vividly expressed in the walk-out.

Two months after the walk-out, in June, ten women electrical trades trainees were hired -- including me and two other Radical Women members. This program, like other Affirmative Action programs, was significant because it grew out of the struggles of the feminist movement and held out the promise that women could break out of economic serfdom and take an equal place in the previous bastion of male privilege -- the skilled trades.

But management immediately began the inevitable sabotage campaign. In a flagrant reprisal, they abruptly removed the program coordinator who was not only our advocate but a Radical Women member who had been a recognized leader of the walk-out. They then terminated our planned pre-placement training program, and proceeded to deny us schooling on company time which is supposed to be granted to all special Affirmative Action program participants. When we protested, demanding that management fulfill its original program plans, we were all given a loyalty oath to sign which gave us the choice of resigning immediately or pledging to give up our rights to free speech and freedom of association -- otherwise known as the right to organize.

Several of the ten trainees, in particular the radicals, have been subjected to continuing harassment as well as trumped-up charges based on anonymous letters that somehow, periodically, find their way to management. Most recently, management informed us that rather than hiring us into regular electrician positions, they had no intention of continuing the program, which had "served its purpose" -- to them at least.

We knew that the only way to overcome this sabotage and betrayal was by resisting every attack and organizing support from every possible source. It was essential to encourage strong trainee solidarity in a unified front against management; only then could we demonstrate our unity to the union and demand fair representation by them. Nine out of ten trainees accordingly filed a class-action sex discrimination claim to try to protect ourselves from being fired and to publicize and expose the underlying social issue of prejudice against us. Our claim also made clear our connection with the militant female leadership of the walk-out and their principle of workers' solidarity.

While there have been many sharp disputes among the trainees over tactics and ideology, most of us have very successfully unified in the face of hostile forces. The one weakness in our solid front has been in the area of participating in union affairs and bringing pressure to bear on the union to support us. The strong differences in our politics have come to life on this issue.

Most of the other trainees are non-political and non-feminist, and two are Lesbian separatists who make a political ideology out of isolation from men and from all political struggles. All these trainees either failed to see that if the union was allowed to sell us out, we would be isolated and powerless in our struggle against management, or else simply couldn't summon the energy and time for union activism, while supporting our efforts.

Towards management, however, we have all been united in our demands. This allowed us radicals to act on the trainees behalf to force the union to fight for our demands, even though the trainees were too intimidated to do it.

Why is the union so important? It is the official organ of the workers, the only organization that labor has in its struggle against management, and our membership in the union provides us with an important vehicle for use against management, and for important association with our co-workers. We consistently advocate to the union that solidarity means not just protecting the rights of white-male members, but adhering to their own basic principles and protecting our rights as women workers equally.

We have won unprecedented support from the union as a result of our militant activism in the union and on the job. When we received the loyalty oath demand from management, the union agreed to write a protest letter to management supporting our right not to sign away our civil rights. Later, when one of us was framed-up on a phony rule violation and suspended for three days, we circulated a petition letter exposing management's denial of civil liberties and protesting the fact that attacks were being made against a woman and minority men. A clear assault on Affirmative Action. We obtained 150 signatures of union members on this petition, which was essentially a socialist-feminist document. It was passed unanimously, as a Resolution at the next union meeting. And most recently, when management threatened to lay us off, we persuaded the union to insist that we be hired into regular positions, and to object to the (still-pending) layoffs on the principle of management's responsibility for Affirmative Action!

The union bureaucracy, of course, has hardly been quick to move on our behalf. We have forced their official support by organizing the rank-and-file to pressure them, or by simply out-arguing them on issues. We proved ourselves dedicated unionists, and we never stop explaining how our struggle for women's rights is an intrinsic part of the labor struggle, not a competitor. Nor have we hesitated to use outside pressure when it was necessary; the union was not acting on the threat to our jobs until Office of Women's Rights officials attended a meeting with union officials and informed the union of its vulnerability to legal action unless they provided us with fair representation!

It was not easy, at first, to convince the Office of Women's Rights to take a forthright stand on our behalf, since the Office is a part of the Executive Department (the mayor). But some excellent investigating was carried on by the office. The trainees clout with the Office was considerably facilitated by the fact that Radical Women was to a large extent responsible for the creation of that office in the first place, only a few years ago!

We have helped to keep the workers' movement alive at City Light by continuing to stand up for and organize around all workers' rights. Like the women walk-out leaders before us, we provided the union with valuable exposure to serious feminism and to the leadership of women. As much as some workers hate to admit it, we have gained respect because of our tenacity and our knowledge of the issues we raised. Because of our consistent union participation and our unmistakable dedication to labor and workers' rights, some of the men have taken heart and continued their own involvement in the general employee's rights grouping.

We have successfully used our fight for union democracy, equal representation and civil rights as a means to elevate the class struggle by raising the consciousness of the workers. With every victory, every defeat, and every attempt, there was always something for us to learn from the union and always something for us to teach. The story of our involvement in Local 77 is the exciting story of a true mutual experience between us and the male workers.