



Canadian Centre for  
Policy Alternatives  
Manitoba Office

# Working across Canada

## International Women's Day 2014: The continuing struggle for bread and roses

*This Work Life forms part of the research by CCPA's National Office for an upcoming report: Working across Canada which will analyse quantitative and qualitative data to determine where workers are more likely to have decent jobs and be protected by adequate employment and labour standards.*

History teaches us the importance of remembering and celebrating International Women's Day. In the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911, 146 young women suffered horrific deaths at this New York City garment factory. It took a tragedy of this magnitude for authorities to begin to consider safety regulations and fire codes, and to highlight the appalling working conditions of thousands of workers. Shocking as the carnage was, the fire did not convince authorities or employers to deal with all the workplace injustices facing women - who laboured for less pay and were more exploited than men. These sorts of conditions still exist in developing countries where manufactures now locate to avoid improved workplace health and safety regulations and paying decent wages. The recent Bangladesh garment factory collapse where over 1,000 mostly female workers were killed is sad testament to the persistence of the exploitation of women workers.

Throughout the 20th century in North America improvements in workplace health and safety regulations were slow in coming, forcing workers to organize and fight for decades. One of the most iconic battles was the 1912 Bread and Roses strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. More than 20,000 immigrant textile workers went on strike against inhumane working and living conditions. Many

workers were women. They played a key role in strategizing and picketing. On these picket lines, women carried banners demanding decent wages (bread) and respect (roses). They faced police brutality, but they drew on deep-seated militancy, courage and resolve, virtues still found today in women's struggles. Every March around the world women organize International Women's Day events to celebrate these accomplishments and to remind society that much change is still required.

Despite improvements in working and living conditions, despite some legislative gains that legally enshrine women's rights, despite the platitudes of politicians and employers alike, women's rights, status and voice continue to be limited. Certainly the data on wage inequality are unequivocal. Women's income remains stubbornly less than men's: men with a high-school diploma earned on average \$975,000 in the 20 year period between 1991 and 2010; women earned \$525,000. So in 20 years, women lost \$450,000! In the same period men with a bachelor's degree earned \$1,707,000 while women earned \$973,000 - a loss of \$734,000. Although these Statistics Canada data were meant to highlight the income benefits of post-secondary education, they also demonstrate the gap between men's and women's incomes. The average woman with a bachelor's degree will still earn

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IN LABOUR ISSUES

# page 2

less than a man with a high-school diploma, and obtaining a degree actually widens the gap between women and men with an equivalent education.

In the workplace women have gained some ground thanks to the equalizing effects of the labour movement, particularly in the public sector where women's union coverage is more than double that of men's. CUPE's 2011 *Battle of the Wages* report found that women employed in the both public and private sector earned significantly less than men. In the public sector, women earned on average 25 per cent less than men. In the private sector the gap was much greater: on average women earned 38 per cent less. Not only does this report belie the claim that public-sector workers earn grossly more than workers in the private sector, it shows that the "small overall 'pay premium' of 0.5 per cent for public sector workers [...] is entirely because of a smaller pay gap for women in the public sector." Whereas women in the public sector are paid on average 4.5 per cent *more* than women in the private sector with similar jobs, men are paid 5.3 per cent *less*. Even higher-income scientific or managerial public-sector workers make less than equivalent private-sector workers. So the report demonstrates that across the board women earn less than men; however the good news is that unions reduce gender inequalities at work, especially for women who work in the public sector.

The CUPE report refutes the flood of anti-union rhetoric about supposedly high-paid unionized workers benefiting on the backs of ordinary Canadians. There is a sustained attack against public-sector workers which is being ushered in under the banner of austerity. By convincing Canadians that the only way to nurture economic growth is to cut taxes and shrink government spending, austerity then demonizes public-sector workers as overpaid

and underworked. The result is a covert attack on female workers.

Plainly stated, austerity is gendered. It is gendered because by attacking the public sector, austerity breaches the very ground where women have made the most gains - through pay-equity legislation and policies that apply to the public sector. It is gendered because it focusses on public-sector workers where the number of unionized women workers is more than double men's. Austerity is gendered because it harkens to a time when precarious work was the norm, when women were delegated to either the reserve army of the unemployed or to do 'women's work': unpaid, underpaid and exploited.

Austerity measures drag us back to the dark times of the Shirtwaist Factory. But today's women have learnt much from their predecessors and will not cede ground without a fierce fight. The battle lines have changed, but women's resolve has not. In most Canadian cities women will be celebrating and organizing on this International Women's Day and many will be speaking out against proposed policy changes unfolding across Canada that will condemn more women to the growing low-wage economy.

*Lynne Fernandez is the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues at CCPA*

*The forthcoming CCPA National report demonstrates how damaging austerity has been to date. Our early research shows that it is women workers who face underemployment, part-time work, low wage and, all too often, precarious work.*

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