

The Mothers' Council of Vancouver: Holding the Fort for the Unemployed, 1935-1938

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In April 1935 the single unemployed men in the National Defence Camps in British Columbia, under the leadership of the Relief Camp Workers' Union, walked out en masse and gathered in Vancouver to confront the authorities with their demand for work and wages. The response of Mayor Gerald Grattan McGeer was to read the Riot Act in Victory Square. The date is well remembered, for 23 April 1935 brought to a head the smouldering unrest of the unemployed. For the next three years, the economy still in crisis, they continued to petition, demonstrate and organize. In May 1938 the relief camp workers precipitated a second major confrontation — the Post Office sit-down strike. During these three years the Mothers' Council of Vancouver supported the unemployed, especially throughout the two major strikes, providing food, clothing and shelter for those who did not qualify for relief, joining wholeheartedly in demonstrations and rallies, and initiating their own forms of protest. Although a superficial account of the Mothers' Council might suggest that it was a traditional women's organization acting in an auxiliary capacity to the Relief Camp Workers' Union, close study reveals that the Council took a pre-eminently political direction, independently attempting to influence governments and contributing substantially to the public debate on what turned out to be an insoluble problem.

"Remember the women of Paris marching on Versailles for bread," remarked an anonymous onlooker as ten mothers from Vancouver led a contingent of the unemployed up Government Street in Victoria in one of the last episodes of the Post Office sit-down strike. The remark was intended to be facetious; in fact it was historically perceptive. For although the women of Vancouver did not get caught up in violence like the women of Paris in 1789 (and of the Commune in 1871), they had a good deal in common with their revolutionary sisters: a grand impatience with the authorities in charge and the will to engage in militant action to solve an economic problem. In England during the Chartist period of the 1830s, women joined with men in demonstrations, according to one

historian even acting "almost as shock troops." In the textile workers' strike of 1912 in Massachusetts, immigrant women "picketed in freezing weather, pregnant women and others with babies in their arms marching with their placards for 'Bread and Roses.'"

British Columbia women have also been militant participants in labour struggles. Vancouver Island miners' wives confronted Premier McBride in Victoria with his responsibilities in the coal miners' strike of 1912-14. In 1935 at Corbin in the Kootenays, miners' wives were on the picket line; some were injured in the fight with police. In 1946 loggers' wives from the Lake Cowichan Women's Auxiliary led the International Woodworkers of America strike trek to the provincial legislature. The women of the Greenham Common peace camp in England, the women of Iceland halting the country's business by a one-day strike — all belong to a long tradition of political protest among women. The Mothers' Council of Vancouver finds an appropriate place in that tradition.¹

The Mothers' Council must be seen in another context as well, that of socialist women for whom the fight for women's rights has been only part of the workers' struggle for full human rights. Indeed some feminists, like Sylvia Pankhurst, eventually moved to the socialist arena and gave precedence to the larger cause of working-class revolution. Not all radical women subsumed their feminist aspirations in this way. Many followed the lead of German Socialist Clara Zetkin (1857-1933), who assigned a paramount role to women's organizations outside the formal structure of the Party. Such groups, she believed, fostered personal growth, creating independent, thinking women with strong, socialist wills. Separate

¹ Anonymous onlooker: *Vancouver Sun*, 21 June 1938, p. 1. Women of Paris: Darline Gay Levy et al., trans. and ed., *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 36-42. Chartists: Dorothy Thompson, "Women and Nineteenth Century Radical Politics," in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1976), p. 119. Textile workers: Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1974), pp. 110-11. Miners' wives: Dorothy G. Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada* (Vancouver, B.C.: J. J. Douglas Ltd., paperbound edition, 1977), pp. 20-22: "They [the Cumberland women] got some accordion-players and a procession led by the musicians and sometimes by women dancing the highland fling would play the strike-breakers to the mine entrance and await them to play them back again." Stuart Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-1966*, Task Force on Labour Relations, Study No. 22 (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1968), p. 221. Women's Auxiliary: Sara Diamond, "A Union Man's Wife: The Ladies' Auxiliary Movement in the IWA, the Lake Cowichan Experience," in *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia*, ed. Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro (Victoria, B.C.: Camosun College, 1984), p. 295.

women's organizations could also reach out to non-political women and gather them into the socialist fold, a more sensitive kind of proselytizing than that which characterized the usual public political meeting. The wisdom of creating separate organizations for women was questioned by some socialists; Lenin, after all, maintained that women should not form a special group within the Party. But he also distinguished between feminist autonomy and "practical revolutionary expediency" as applied to unpoliticized women.² In the Vancouver of the thirties, left-wing women,³ many with a history of feminist activism, adopted this pragmatic approach: their Mothers' Council was one of those women's groups formed, in part at least, for the practical purpose of giving women a voice and encouraging them to use it.

No historical accounts exist of the Mothers' Council or the other left-wing women's groups associated with it, for both women generally and left-wing movements have until recently been omitted from "official" history. It is only in the last twenty years that scholars have turned their attention to these two fields of study and that archivists have actively sought to acquire the necessary documents. Even so, biographies of left-wing women and accounts of their organizations are only now beginning to be written, and standard histories of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) continue to emphasize "the male perspective, even though, especially in the provincial B.C. party, women played key roles."⁴ Supplying the need for a history of left-wing women from a feminine perspective, Joan Sangster breaks new ground and opens the way for

² Jane Slaughter and Robert Kern, "Introduction," *European Women on the Left: Socialism, Feminism and the Problems Faced by Political Women, 1880 to the Present*, ed. Slaughter and Kern (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 6-7. Karen Honeycut, "Clara Zetkin: A Socialist Approach to the Problem of Women's Oppression," in Slaughter and Kern, p. 38.

³ In this essay the phrase "left-wing women" will denote women in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) along with their sympathizers.

⁴ Susan Walsh, "Equality, Emancipation and a More Just World: Leading Women in the British Columbia Cooperative Commonwealth Federation" (M.A. dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 1983), p. 10. The political careers of Helena Gutteridge, Laura Jamieson, Dorothy Steeves and Grace MacInnis are studied in relation to their "dual roles" as feminists and as socialists.

Women are all but completely missing from the CPC History Commission's *Canada's Party of Socialism: History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1921-1976* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1982). Brief accounts of the Women's Labour League and the Congress of Canadian Women and of CPC views on the WLL and the Women's Lib movement of the sixties are given in Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: a History* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), pp. 74 and 247-49.

further detailed work in this field with her recent comprehensive study, "Canadian Women in Radical Politics and Labour, 1920-1950."⁵

However, the task of writing left-wing women into the history of Canada will not be an easy one, for in many cases their records (and this is true of the Mothers' Council) are not to be found. There is no problem finding archival materials for large women's organizations which have become institutions — the National Council of Women, for example, or the Women's Institute. The leading women in such organizations had a strong feeling of belonging to an important and continuing tradition whose history obviously had to be preserved. But women in less permanent regional and local organizations, no matter what their politics, have not had sufficient sense of their own importance to preserve their records. Given their almost complete exclusion from the pages of history and the pre-eminence there of the male experience, it is little wonder that when it came time to deal with their accumulated papers, they destroyed them. Even the ebullient Effie Jones (1889-1985), well-known as a communist contender in Vancouver politics for two decades, was no proof against the prevailing indifference to women's history.⁶ She had preserved the records of the Housewives' League of Vancouver (1938-43) through the repressive political climate of the thirties and early forties, when, chairing meetings of the League, she felt impelled to warn members that undercover agents were present at the back of the room. Finally, in her old age

⁵ Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University, 1984 (publication forthcoming). See also Joan Sangster, "The Communist Party and the Woman Question, 1922-1929," *Labour/Le Travail* 15 (Spring 1985): 25-56, and "Women of the 'New Era': Women in the Early CCF," in *Building the Cooperative Commonwealth*, ed. W. Brennan (Regina: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1985).

⁶ Some of the more cautious among British Columbia socialists and communists burned their papers or buried them, along with their Marxist books, for fear of being caught in a police raid with incriminating evidence (interviews with Emil Bjarnason, 9 October 1985, and Ruth Bullock, 4 October 1985). Grace MacInnis, former CCF MLA, recalls that her own political involvement began during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 during which her father, J. S. Woodsworth, was arrested. At her mother's bidding, Grace packed her father's books and papers in a box and hid them in the woods. Her mother further instructed Grace not to tell her where they were, for if the RCMP came to search the house, Mrs. Woodsworth wanted to plead ignorance (interview with Grace MacInnis by Anne Scotton, SP 164:1, University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections Division (UBCL)).

During the McCarthy era of the fifties, the peace movement was particularly vulnerable to the "guilt by association" tactic of anti-communists. The fear and distrust of the times was such that splits occurred in the peace movement. In the much respected Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, a division occurred among members, as a result of which, it was discovered some years later, their records from the beginning (1921) to the mid-fifties had been destroyed by a former member (interview with Sheila Young, Vancouver, 22 October 1985).

in the 1970s she concluded that her papers were "of no interest to anyone." "I destroyed them all," she said.⁷

There is a certain irony in the fact that the left-wing historian, in the absence of membership lists and minute books, may find lists of members, accounts of meetings, correspondence and all manner of newsletters and other printed ephemera in police records. It is evident from the Vancouver Police Department files that the meetings and other activities of the CCF Women's Central Group, the Mothers' Council and the Women's Labour League were all under surveillance during the relief camp workers' strike of 1935 and the Post Office sit-down strike of 1938. Yet even here women have received short shrift, for it appears that the undercover agent was no more able than any other male observer of the time to view the participation of women in politics with anything but condescension. In his report on left-wing response to the reading of the Riot Act, one Vancouver agent commented with benevolent contempt, "I have never seen so many women running around, one would think it was election night."⁸

Dependent as it is on such limited sources as the left-wing and daily press and interviews, the history of the Mothers' Council must necessarily be incomplete, at least in terms of the requirements of traditional male-oriented history.⁹ This does not mean that the Council must be excluded

⁷ Interview with Effie Jones, tape 3588-1, Women's Labour History Collection (WLHC), Provincial Archives of British Columbia (PABC). The B.C. Federation of Labour and SFU Library have copies. When storage space was a problem a woman might find room for her husband's "more important" papers and destroy her own. Conversation with Ruth Bullock, North Vancouver, 4 October 1985. On censorship in Canada during the thirties, with particular reference to Section 98 of the Criminal Code, see F. R. Scott, "Freedom of Speech in Canada," *Proceedings of the Canadian Political Science Association*, 5, May 1933, 169-89.

⁸ Unaddressed and unsigned memorandum, 27 April 1935, in Vancouver City Police Department (VCPD) files. Cited in "Documents Related to the Vancouver Strike and the On to Ottawa Trek," in Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, ed. Victor Hoar (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), p. 155. In addition to their obvious political bias, such reports are often inaccurate as to names and so poorly written as to be obscure. Police files on the single unemployed for 1935 and 1938 are in Vancouver City Archives (VCA). See esp. Loc. 75 (F) 2 and 75 (E) 7.

⁹ The Attorney-General's papers, PABC, provided a few letters from the Mothers' Council. Their correspondence with Vancouver City Council was noted in city council minutes, but the letters themselves were not deposited with Vancouver City Archives.

Left-wing newspapers consulted: the CCF *Commonwealth*, superseded by the *Federationist*; the communist *B.C. Workers' News*, superseded by the *People's Advocate*.

Of the women interviewed, the two who remembered most about the Mothers' Council telescoped the Council with another organization in the process of creating

from serious study. It does mean that certain kinds of research — for example, a quantitative study of the composition of the rank and file membership — cannot be undertaken. Instead, new ways of perceiving and handling the already available material have to be employed.¹⁰ In this essay, re-reading the daily press from a woman's point of view provided factual information which had heretofore been ignored. Newspapers also yielded another kind of information not usually perceived as such — the emotional force of events. In addition, new, historically significant persons and events were discovered when certain newspaper reports were transposed from the comic to the serious.¹¹ Women involved in strike events were sometimes treated in the press in the abstract as a homogeneous and stereotypical entity, "Woman," and as such were objects of indulgent humour without any claim to serious consideration. When, however, the reports were read from a feminist perspective, these women emerged as resolute, politicized individuals comprising an elite within both the CCF and the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). On being asked who on a list of CCF women of the thirties were working-class and who middle-class, one informant finally expostulated: "Working-class women in those days were intelligent human beings who had read enough and thought enough to know you had to change the system."¹²

It did seem, during the Great Depression of the thirties, that the capitalist system was breaking down, such was the depth of the economic crisis. In the spring and summer of 1935, the focus for unrest was a class

a life review. Effie Jones merged in memory the Mothers' Council with the Housewives League, which had launched her career in civic politics and was thus for her the more important of the two groups. Lil Stoneman telescoped the Mothers' Council with the Women's Labour League, of which, as secretary, she had been a leading member (tape 3601, WLHC). Jean Barman deals with the selectivity of memory in her working paper prepared for the Canadian Childhood History Project, "Accounting for Gender and Class in Retrieving the History of Canadian Childhood." On the "life review" (pp. 7-9), she cites, among others, Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 113.

¹⁰ On the question of re-examining available sources for new insights see Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," in *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 353.

¹¹ For a discussion of the need for historians to abandon the study of Woman in the abstract, see Sheila Ryan Johansson, "'Herstory' as History: A New Field or Another Fad?" in Carroll, pp. 402-03. For the effects of mockery and caricature on emerging women, see Rowbotham, p. 106. See *Vancouver Sun* report discussed on p. 57, fn. 66.

¹² Conversation with Hilda Kristiansen, 8 October 1985.

of single unemployed men who could not claim domicile, for they had not lived long enough in British Columbia. These were the men whom the Mothers' Council supported and befriended. The transients, as they were called, were mostly migrant workers attracted to Vancouver by the mild climate and the small hope, soon extinguished, that here conditions might be better. They had no home, unless a hobo jungle like the one behind the Canadian National Railway station could be called home, or the construction camps operated for a short time by the provincial government. With over 75,000 registered unemployed in British Columbia alone in June 1932, the federal government, fearful of uprisings across the country, accepted General McNaughton's plan to defuse incipient insurrection by isolating the men in relief camps. Thus in June 1933 the provincial road camps were incorporated into the national relief camp program of the Department of National Defence.¹³

But General McNaughton's plan did not work. The necessary funding for rehabilitation was not forthcoming from the federal government. The men were lonely, discontented, and starved for emotional and mental stimulation. Most of all they resented being paid twenty cents for a full day's work. Their Relief Camp Workers' Union, affiliated with the Workers' Unity League, protested camp conditions and claimed the camps had been militarized. When union organizers were expelled from the camps and blacklisted, the men began walking out.¹⁴ In December 1934, 1,200 relief camp workers arrived in Vancouver and stayed for four weeks, demanding an end to the blacklist and re-instatement of those expelled. In April they staged another, and larger, walkout. Other unemployed men joined them. United in a disciplined group behind radical leaders, the unemployed now confronted the authorities as a powerful constituency, demanding real work with real wages and abolition of the camps.¹⁵ Standing on street corners, holding out their tin cans

¹³ Registered unemployed: "Province of British Columbia, History of Relief: October, 1930-December 1937," E. E. Winch Personal Papers, 55a.24, Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection (AMMC), UBCL. Relief camps: Marion Lane, "Unemployment During the Depression: The Problem of the Single Unemployed Transient in British Columbia, 1930-1938" (Graduating Essay, University of British Columbia, 1966), pp. 52-61. For a history and description of the camps, see "The Report of the Macdonald Commission," cited in full in Liversedge, ed. Hoar, pp. 125-45.

¹⁴ Lane, pp. 75-85.

¹⁵ For a first-hand account of December 1934 strike, see Jean Evans Sheils and Ben Swankey, "Work and Wages!" — *Semi-documentary Account of the Life and Times of Arthur H. (Slim) Evans* (Vancouver: Trade Union Research Bureau, 1977), p. 81. See also *Commonwealth*, 20 December 1934, p. 1, and "Relief Camp Workers' Appeal to the People of British Columbia and Citizens of Vancouver," Vancouver, March 1935, E. E. Winch Personal Papers, 55a.24, AMMC.

to collect money from passers-by, snarling traffic with their routine marches, the men were a presence that could not be ignored. Their numbers increased dramatically: the 9 April march of 5,000 men through downtown streets added, the *Vancouver Sun* observed, "a new chapter to the history of labour demonstration in Vancouver." The authorities, not least of all Mayor McGeer, were very much afraid of a popular revolt. It was, after all, only eighteen years since the Russian Revolution.¹⁶ Both the mayor and Premier Pattullo insisted that unemployment was a federal responsibility and looked to Ottawa for financial assistance, but Prime Minister R. B. Bennett turned a deaf ear, taking refuge in the constitution: the men were a federal responsibility only while they were in the National Defence Camps. The strikers, having left the camps, were now a provincial responsibility and Vancouver must therefore look to Victoria for help, "for a municipality is a creation of the province."¹⁷

On 23 April 1935 a department store parade ended in a confrontation with the police and the reading of the Riot Act. Although in a private communication with Ottawa McGeer blamed the disturbance on the federal government's "ineffective policy of administering the unemployment situation," in his radio address a few days later he blamed the strike on communist leaders. It was a speech that could only contribute to the prevailing climate of fear; it did nothing to help solve the problem of how to feed the destitute strikers. On the following May Day 14,000 people marched in the parade and 20,000 gathered in Stanley Park for the rally. Public sympathy was with the strikers, as even Mayor McGeer acknowledged. For the left-wing strategists, the day was cause for jubilation, its success being in large part due to the co-operation of the CCF and the CPC on the issue of the unemployed. But Chief Constable Foster, reporting to Mayor McGeer, saw the day as "a real tragedy" because it had brought hopeful young men into contact with "foreigners of a low type" and "Communitistic organizations intent upon destruction."¹⁸

¹⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 10 April 1935, p. 2. Authorities: Documents cited in Liversedge, ed. Hoar, pp. 147-66, esp. pp. 147-49, Premier T. D. Pattullo to Sir George Perley, 25 and 27 March 1935.

¹⁷ Mayor McGeer and Bennett: Exchange of telegrams, 16-21 May 1935, from *Report of the Regina Riot Commission*, pp. 84-85, cited in Liversedge, ed. Hoar, pp. 162-64. Pattullo: "T. Dufferin Pattullo and the Little New Deal," in *Politics of Discontent*, ed. Ramsay Cook et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), pp. 33-36; Premier Pattullo, "Your Government and the Problem of Relief," *Vancouver Sun*, 7 May 1935, p. 2.

¹⁸ For eyewitness accounts of the day's events see Acting Inspector Lester to Chief Constable Foster, 25 April 1935, in Liversedge, ed. Hoar, pp. 151-52, and Liver-

It was in this volatile political climate, with the three governments in a paralyzing stand-off and the strikers depending on public charity for food and shelter, that the left-wing women of Vancouver joined forces to form the Mothers' Day Committee, which eventually evolved into a permanent group, the Mothers' Council. The Committee originated among women participating in the events of a ten-day period from 23 April to 3 May. The Women's New Era League had called a conference late in April to discuss the relief camp strike. First formed in 1916 to help women make the best possible use of their newly won franchise, the League had been for nearly two decades an influential advocate of social legislation, notably the Pension Allowance Act (renamed the Children's Allowance Act). Susan Clark, its first president, was now its representative on the Vancouver Local Council of Women, a non-partisan federation of women's groups affiliated with the National Council of Women. The April conference brought together at the Hotel Georgia twenty-four delegates but announced itself as representing seventy-two organizations, since the delegate from the Local Council of Women represented fifty-seven of them. The other twenty-three delegates represented, among others, the Civilian Pensioned Mothers, the Women's Section of the Provincial Workers' Council, several church organizations and the Socialist Party. With Fanny Cowper of the New Era League in the chair and Peggy Harrison of the Women's Labour League secretary, the conference unanimously passed a resolution introduced by the Unemployment Relief Committee of the Local Council of Women urging the federal government to provide a works program and immediate temporary relief for the strikers. Vancouver school trustee Ada Crump announced that she would put the same resolution to the Provincial Parent-Teachers' Federation, also in conference that week. Because the New Era League conference coincided with the crisis over the reading of the Riot Act, the delegates elected an action committee of twelve to send a delegation to the mayor. The conference also discussed the need for unity among women

sedge's own memories, *ibid.*, pp. 74-76. Recalling events from a distance of thirty years, Liversedge telescopes the May Day rally and the Mothers' Day parade and rally held twelve days later. "Ineffective policy": McGeer to Sir George Perley, 23 April, in R. B. Bennett Papers, cited in Liversedge, ed. Hoar, p. 151. McGeer's speech: *Vancouver Sun*, 29 April 1935, pp. 1 and 5. May Day rally and Foster's report: Liversedge, ed. Hoar, pp. 157-58. A detailed account of the relief camp workers' strike is given in Victor Howard [formerly Victor Hoar], "*We Were the Salt of the Earth!*" *The On-to-Ottawa Trek and the Regina Riot* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1985).

and directed the action committee to meet again to consider further action.¹⁹

When the conference delegation visited Mayor McGeer the next day, 25 April, they requested that he demand immediate action from the federal government. Jumping at the chance to put pressure on Ottawa, McGeer wired Deputy Prime Minister Sir George Perley on the spot:

Public opinion is overwhelmingly opposed to any policy of forcing the men now on strike to return to camps without some definite indication that a work and wages program will be developed in immediate future. Public opposed to jailing these men for vagrancy.

If your government will not agree to call a conference through which some practical solution can be developed, I greatly fear the disorder that will accompany the widespread dissatisfaction and unrest that is arising.

While there is Communistic activity, the opposition to the existing relief system is by no means confined to that element.

The delegation in my office at the moment is representative of best citizenship of our city.²⁰

The reading of the Riot Act had also sparked another very large popular demonstration in support of the relief camp strikers: the CCF parade and rally in the Denman Street Arena on 28 April. In this event, women in the CCF party committed themselves brilliantly, providing leadership, emotional energy, and their own kind of platform charisma.²¹ The New Era League Conference action committee was doubtless given new impetus by the performance of socialist women in this great mass demonstration. Riding on a strong wave of political feeling in their own groups and in sympathetic non-political women's groups at this time, a nucleus of women from the CCF and Women's Labour League, some of whom were probably on the action committee, constituted themselves a Mothers' Day Committee which would carry out various activities on Mothers' Day in support of the relief camp strikers.²² The fact that so

¹⁹ Conference: *Vancouver Sun*, 26 April 1935, p. 4; *B.C. Workers' News*, 10 May 1935, p. 2. New Era League: Helen Gregory McGill Papers, Add Mss. 270, pp. 54-55, VCA. Susan Lane Clark; Mary Patricia Powell, "A Response to the Depression: the Local Council of Women of Vancouver," in *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.*, ed. Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess (Victoria, B.C.: Camosun College, 1980), p. 268. Powell lists the societies affiliated with the LCW on p. 277: one-third of the fifty-seven affiliates were church groups and branches of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

²⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 April 1935, p. 4.

²¹ See below, p. 261.

²² *Commonwealth*, 3 May 1935. Arthur Evans, leader of the On-to-Ottawa Trek, says the Committee was initiated by CCF women: Sheils and Swankey, p. 95; the *B.C. Workers' News*, 17 May 1935, p. 2, says it was initiated by the Women's Labour League.

many of the women knew one another through overlapping memberships, especially in the New Era League, the CCF Women's Central Group, and the Local Council of Women, suggests that the action committee may have *become* the Mothers' Day Committee or at least formed its nucleus. In any case, over the summer of 1935 the Committee evolved into a permanent group and by August had changed its name to the Mothers' Council.²³

Not a great deal is known about the thirty-seven women who attended the first meeting of the Mothers' Day Committee on 3 May 1935. However, among those participating in their tag day the following week were women from the Local Council of Women, the New Era League, the Women's and Girls' Club, the Kitsilano Women's Club (Unemployed Section), the Women's Christian Temperance Union and, of course, the CCF Women's Central Group and the Women's Labour League. The original Committee almost certainly comprised women from these groups, all of which, except the Local Council of Women and the WCTU, belonged to the left or at least leaned that way. Women could also belong as individuals.²⁴ In the absence of record books, it is not possible to discuss the nature of the rank and file membership of the Mothers' Council. More is known about the leadership, which came largely from the CCF Women's Central Group and the CPC's Women's Labour League.

The CCF Women's Central Group was formed as early as the fall of 1934 to provide educational and social programs for CCF women as well as to co-ordinate their political activities. An offshoot of the CCF Education Committee, its main objective was to increase the political and social awareness, not just of women from local CCF clubs but of non-CCF women in the community as well. Membership in the Central Group was

²³ According to the research thus far, the Mothers' Council was first referred to by that name in the *Commonwealth*, 23 August 1935, p. 1.

²⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 21 May 1938, p. 1; *Federationist*, 9 June 1938, p. 5. Socialists Dorothy Steeves, Susan Lane Clark, Helena Gutteridge and Laura Jamieson were very active in the Local Council of Women in these years: Powell, pp. 262, 272 and 275. Susan Clark, Helena Gutteridge and Mary Norton, also a socialist, were leading members of the New Era League: *supra* fn. 19; Susan Wade, "Helena Gutteridge: Votes for Women and Trade Unions," in Latham and Kess, p. 199; interview with Mary Norton, Vancouver, 21 February 1973, #141, Reynoldston Research and Studies, Oral History Programs, tape transcript, UBCL. In a report to the Toronto Branch of the Left Opposition, 24 September 1933, Earle Birney identified the Vancouver Women and Girls' Club as a Trotskyist organization which the "Stalinites" were trying to take over: Earle Birney Papers, University of Toronto. It is probably safe to say that the Kitsilano Women's Club with its Unemployed Women's Section was also a left-wing group. Conversations with Hilda Kristiansen, Vancouver, 8 October 1985, and Mildred Liversedge, Parksville, B.C., 15 September 1985, provided the names of a few individual members.

in addition to membership in a Vancouver or district CCF club. The women heard reports about what was going on in the legislature, House of Commons, city council and Vancouver School Board. They were encouraged to take part in discussion and were offered courses in public speaking.²⁵ Most importantly, they were provided with a role model of the socialist woman as a person who translated political and social awareness into action.

All of the women giving leadership to the CCF Women's Central Group were also active in the main body of the CCF. Mildred Osterhout (1900-), later Fahrni, had been a CCF candidate in the provincial election of 1933 and would win a place on the Vancouver School Board in the fall of 1935. On her weekly CCF broadcasts, "The Women's View," she sought to raise the political consciousness of her listeners as well as keep them informed on CCF policy and local issues. Journalist Elizabeth Kerr (1887-1978), under the name of Constance Errol, wrote a weekly column, also called "The Women's View," in the CCF newspaper the *Federationist*. An outspoken advocate for women and the unemployed, she was elected to the CCF Provincial Executive in 1938. One-time trade unionist and militant suffragist, Helena Gutteridge (1879-1960), emerged from political retirement in 1932 to re-dedicate herself to socialism by campaigning on the speakers' platform for CCF candidates in the 1933 provincial election. At the time of the relief camp workers' strike she was an invaluable member of the very important CCF Economic Planning Commission and would become its head the following year. Her fellow suffragist and friend, Susan Lane Clark (c. 1880s-1956), was also a veteran socialist campaigner and in 1937 won a two-year term on the Vancouver Parks Board. Sarah Colley (1880-1943) from New Westminster was on the roster of speakers who went out to explain party policy on unemployment to local CCF clubs. In fact all of these women were actively involved in the work of the CCF Unemployment Conference, Helena Gutteridge being secretary and Elizabeth Kerr head of the Women's Grievance Committee.²⁶ (The Conference consisted

²⁵ *Commonwealth*, 13 December 1934, p. 3; Circular letters, 12 November 1935 and 17 June 1936, E. E. Winch Personal Papers, 55a.29, AMMC.

²⁶ For biographical sketches of these women and for details not in these sketches see: Osterhout: *Commonwealth*, 25 October 1933, p. 3; 13 December 1935, p. 1; type-scripts of broadcasts in private possession. Kerr: *Federationist*, 25 February 1937, p. 8 and 7 July 1938, p. 5. Gutteridge and Lane: Linda Hale, "Appendix: Votes for Women: Profiles of Prominent British Columbia Suffragists and Social Reformers," in Latham and Kess, pp. 288-89 and 292; planning commission: *Federationist*, 25 March 1937, p. 1. Colley: *Commonwealth*, 23 May 1935, p. 6 and 15 February 1935, p. 7. Unemployment Conference: *Commonwealth*, 2 August 1934,

of delegates from various CCF clubs and the CCF Provincial Council, who met frequently to take action on behalf of the unemployed.)

On 28 April, a few days after the reading of the Riot Act, the CCF staged a mass rally in the Denman Street Arena. The CCF Women's Central Group, led by Elizabeth Kerr, called a mass meeting in Moose Hall to make plans for a parade of women to the Arena rally. The organizing ability, the imagination and energy of the CCF women, as revealed in reports of the Moose Hall meeting and of the parade and rally, point to the political contribution they would be bringing to the Mothers' Council. The reports themselves supply evidence of the strong public emotions surrounding the whole question of the single unemployed transients.

Three hundred women attended the meeting, the CCF Women's Central Group, the Women's Labour League, the Parent-Teachers' Association and the New Era League playing a leading role. They decided that, in addition to the parade, they would also hold a tag day,²⁷ not to collect money, as was usually done, but to advertise the meeting. According to the report of the undercover agent who attended the Moose Hall meeting, a male CCF functionary addressed the women on the question of holding the tag day. The agent's report implies a passive audience of women getting their instructions from a male leader.²⁸ In contrast, the *Vancouver Sun* reporter reveals in his account women of energy and spirit who, far from being passive, give the impression that they themselves had everything in hand and were the initiators of action:

'It's up to the people to abolish the relief camps,' was the cry that went up from more than 300 women assembled under the auspices of the C.C.F. Women's Group in the Moose Hall on Thursday evening.

'We've had enough of commissions, delegations and petitions,' they shouted. 'Now we'll take over and act.'

* * *

'Abolish the camps: don't let the boys go back,' the women urged. Not once were the strikers referred to as such or as men; always 'our boys.'

* * *

Shouts of 'let's go' greeted Ernest Cumber, Secretary of the Relief Camp

p. 1; 22 February 1935, p. 7; "Annual Report of the CCF Unemployment Conference," 24 July 1935, E. E. Winch Personal Papers, 55a.30, AMMC.

²⁷ Charitable organizations holding a tag day stationed their members on downtown sidewalks to solicit money from passers-by in return for a tag declaring the message or slogan of the organization. City by-laws allowed only three tag days a year.

²⁸ Liversedge, ed. Hoar, pp. 153-54.



Sarah Colley



Helena Gutteridge



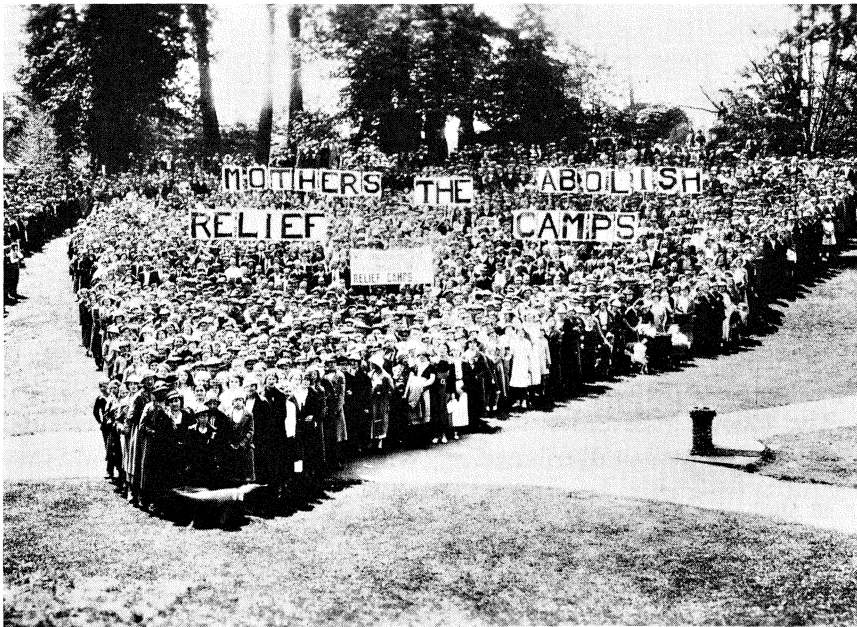
Mothers' Council marching in May Day Parade, Georgia near Pender, 1930s



Effie Jones



Elizabeth Kerr



Women's demonstration, Stanley Park, 1935

Workers' Union, when he said he would like to have the pleasure of leading the women down Granville Street and to the City Hall.²⁹

The Commission referred to was the Macdonald Commission, finally appointed by an intransigent federal government on 28 March 1935 to study camp conditions, too late to stop the strike. In April there had been delegations of strikers to see Mayor McGeer, three in as many days; the first, led by Dorothy Steeves, represented the Action Committee of the Relief Camp Workers' Union and the Canadian Labour Defence League. A petition containing some 35,000 names had been presented, with an accompanying brief, to Premier Pattullo by a delegation from the B.C. Joint Committee on Unemployment; Sarah Colley had been chosen to present the case for the impoverished mothers.³⁰ None of these efforts had been to any avail, and now, like the miners' wives of Vancouver Island and Corbin, and the women of Versailles, the Vancouver women at the Moose Hall meeting took action.

The *Sun* report also reveals the parental compassion felt by the assembled women for the strikers, a feeling shared by the people of Vancouver generally. The relief camp workers had become "the boys" or "our boys," and almost always were referred to in this way by speakers addressing mass rallies. Some of the older strikers were a little embarrassed at being so fondly addressed, as Ronald Liversedge recalled thirty years later:

Ma Boley, an old-time C.C.F.'er, a wonderful personality, coined the phrase, 'Our Boys'. . . . [He was surely referring to Sarah Colley.] While it came from the heart and actually described the vast majority of the camp workers, to those of us who were then in our late thirties, the phrase 'Our Boys' produced in us a certain self-consciousness.³¹

Whether or not Sarah Colley did introduce the phrase, it evokes the aura of feeling surrounding many of the events of April and May 1935, especially those planned by the women.

The following Saturday morning in downtown Vancouver, a large contingent of women distributed 25,000 tags bearing the question, "Our

²⁹ 26 April 1935, pp. 1 and 4.

³⁰ The complete report of the Commission is in Liversedge, ed. Hoar, pp. 125-45. Delegations: *Vancouver Sun*, 9 April 1935, pp. 1 and 12; *Commonwealth*, 12 April 1935, pp. 1 and 2. Petition and brief: "Annual Report of the CCF Unemployment Conference," 24 July 1935 and "Report of Delegation of Unemployed Sponsored by the British Columbia Joint Committee on Unemployment. . . ." in private possession. The prime movers in the Committee were the CCF, represented by their Unemployment Conference, and the Communist Party of Canada, represented by the Provincial Workers' Alliance.

³¹ Liversedge, ed. Hoar, p. 64.

Boys, Are They Criminals?" This was a reminder that unemployed young men were being sent to jail for "tin-canning" or begging on the streets. The women also collected signatures on a petition demanding that the relief camps be closed.³²

Then came Sunday's parade, stage-managed with a flair for political theatre by the CCF women. According to Victor Howard's narrative,

They [the camp men] had been told that they would set out first for the Arena, with the CCF women next. . . . But Sarah Colley now approached Smokey [Ernest] Cumber [secretary of the Relief Camp Workers' Union] and asked him whether the women could walk at the head of the column. Smokey said all right and off they went.

The RCMP had witnessed this exchange: 'Again the CCF leaders proved themselves masters of manoeuvres and sent Mother Colley to Cumber to ask him for the head of the line for the women. Cumber agreed.'³³

The RCMP agent's interpretation, based as it is on a male view of docile womanhood, does not take into account that the CCF leadership included a number of forceful women whom one did not "send" to carry out one's bidding. The CCF Women's Central Group quite likely took the initiative in the arrangement with Cumber. Thus it was that two thousand Vancouver women, with Sarah Colley out in front, led the march from Cambie Street Grounds to the Denman Street Arena. Behind the women marched the contingent of relief camp workers and their sympathizers, 1,800 strong. Crowds lined the route and cheered as they passed. When they entered the Arena, "a storm of cheering broke as the women marched to seats on the floor in front of the rostrum." Then came the strikers, "the boys," in disciplined divisions, banners aloft. The assembled crowd numbered 16,000, the largest ever to attend an indoor meeting in Vancouver. Among those speaking from the platform were such CCF notables as Harold Winch, the fiery MLA, the eloquent Dr. Lyle Telford — and Sarah Colley, introduced as "the CCF Mother."³⁴

The second main group providing leadership in the Mothers' Council was the Women's Labour League, comprising largely communist women, with branches in Vancouver, Vancouver Island and other parts of British Columbia during the thirties. The Labour Leagues originated in Britain after the general election of 1906 as women's unions affiliated with the British Labour Party. Transplanted in Canada before World War I, with

³² *Commonwealth*, 3 May 1935, p. 7.

³³ RCMP report: Howard, p. 61.

³⁴ Parade and rally: *Vancouver Sun*, 29 April 1935, p. 1; "CCF Mother": *Commonwealth*, 3 May 1935, p. 3.

branches in Port Arthur, Fort William, Winnipeg and Toronto, a Canadian Federation of Women's Labour Leagues was formed at a convention in Ontario in 1924, with the aim of affiliating with the Trades and Labour Congress and thus facilitating the unionization of women workers. However, the Congress refused to endorse the Women's Labour Leagues because of their strong communist support. After the Sixth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow in 1928, and at the suggestion of the Comintern, the Leagues affiliated with the Workers' Unity League (WUL), the intention being that, in line with the policy of the Comintern's Third Period (1928-35), they should participate fully in the revolutionary labour movement launched by the Communist Party in its dramatic turn to the left. In British Columbia the response of the Leagues to this new directive was to encourage women to set up union auxiliaries and to help establish a union for domestic servants. The Leagues also supported the Party's efforts on behalf of the unemployed, participating in Hunger Marches and Neighbourhood Unemployment Committees. In Vancouver, throughout the depression, the League was inventive and energetic in coming to the aid of the distressed. Wherever a family was threatened with eviction, the League was on the picket line, even on occasion carrying back through the rear door the furniture which the sheriff had just moved out the front. It interceded on behalf of families having difficulty in getting relief and operated summer camps for the children of needy working-class families, eventually establishing a permanent campsite on Indian Arm.³⁵

Not a great deal is known of the Women's Labour League rank and file in Vancouver or elsewhere in the province, but, like the CCF Women's Central Group, the Vancouver League was sustained by a spirited and committed leadership. Lil Stoneman, a former Saskatchewan schoolteacher and wife of an unemployed worker, was recording secretary in 1935. The League's organizer, Annie Stewart (1893-1977), had travelled throughout British Columbia in the late twenties and early

³⁵ Transplanted: Carol Bacchi, "Divided Allegiances: the Response of Farm and Labour Women to Suffrage," in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s*, ed. Linda Kealey (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1979), p. 97. WLL, 1924 convention: John Manley, "Women and the Left in the 1930s: the Case of the Toronto CCF Women's Joint Committee," *Atlantis* 5 (Spring 1980): 118. Evolution of WLL: Sangster, "Canadian Women," esp. ch. iii; cf. Avakumovic, p. 74 and *Canada's Party of Socialism*, p. 32. Eviction: interview with Elspeth Gardner, Vancouver, 6 March 1985. A branch of the WLL was formed in Calgary in the late 1920s: "Memoirs," p. 46, Jean McDonald Papers, M 724, Glenbow-Alberta Institute.

thirties, helping to establish new branches of the League — twenty-four in all. As a CPC organizer, in 1934 she visited Britannia Beach, Comox and Cumberland to encourage women in these mining communities to set up auxiliaries to the Mine Workers' Union of Canada. Annie Stewart also helped set up the Women's Auxiliary of the Vancouver Waterfront Workers. A stone-mason's daughter from Lancashire, she had started out soon after her arrival in 1911 as a children's nanny in a Vancouver household, an unlikely beginning for a future CPC organizer. Her great friend and co-worker, Elsie Munro (1887-1964), a little Scotswoman from Aberdeenshire, had been a cook in the British army during World War I and afterwards supervised the kitchens of the Scottish aristocracy for several years before immigrating to Canada. She married Peter Munro, who carried on a political courtship with her on park benches, declaring he would not marry her until she too became a socialist. The husbands of both women were leading members of the militant Street Railwaymen's Union (Charles Stewart was their long-time business agent), and all four were Party comrades.³⁶

Communist women in the Mothers' Council did not all come from the Women's Labour League. Telephone operator Mildred Dougan (1905-), from a Vancouver Island pioneer farm family, thought the League was "too leftist," even for her, whose father had started out as a Nanaimo coal worker and retained strong working-class sympathies. She married Ronald Liversedge, one of the 1935 strike leaders, when he came back from fighting in the Spanish Civil War as a member of the MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion. Neither had one of the most politically talented of the communist women in Vancouver in the later thirties been a member of the Women's Labour League. Effie Jones, former school-teacher from Somerset and Wales, wife of a telephone lineman, joined the CCF in 1933 but left it five years later for the CPC because the CCF, as she put it, "wouldn't unite with anybody on anything." She was a member of the Mothers' Council from the beginning and during the 1938 sit-down strike, when she had either just made the transition to the CPC or was about to do so, emerged as one of the Council's leaders. However, it appears that once the strike was over she threw her main efforts into the newly incorporated Vancouver Housewives' League, a non-political consumers' group which soon expanded to become a pro-

³⁶ Lil Stoneman, WLHC; Annie Stewart: Conversation with Margaret North, Vancouver, 23 October 1985; *Pacific Tribune*, 23 February 1951, p. 2; *B.C. Workers' News*, 28 June 1935, p. 2. I am grateful to Mickey Beagle for this and other references to the women of the WLL in Vancouver.

vincial organization, influential in its efforts to combat rising prices during the early war years.³⁷

As with the CCF Women's Central Group, the question arises as to what extent the activities of the Women's Labour League were generated by directives from CPC headquarters. Again it must be conceded that women were targeted as a special sector for party proselytizing. In his introduction to Ronald Liversedge's *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, Victor Hoar acknowledges the "radical imperative" of the Relief Camp Workers' Union and the Workers' Unity League, with both of which the League women worked closely. But he makes this cautionary observation:

It would be a mistake to assume that the single ambition of the communists was the embarrassment of any government, municipal, provincial or federal, which happened to get in their way. It would be another mistake to dismiss the rank and file of communists in this or any other protest movement of the era as agents of the Soviet Union. The Great Depression may have been induced by international economic upheavals, but we cannot afford to ignore the specific domestic tragedies, nor the conditions which inspired those tragedies. The radicals of Canada did not then, as they do not today, exist in a historical vacuum.³⁸

These communist women did understand the political dimensions of working in the Women's Labour League and the Mothers' Council. This was what Lenin meant by "mass work." They were also aware of the "specific domestic tragedies" and the conditions which inspired those tragedies. When they looked about, they did not see "the masses." They saw their neighbours and fellow human beings. They saw families evicted from their homes, pregnant women deprived of milk for their unborn babies, fathers psychologically shattered because they couldn't support their families, mothers worn out by childbirth and the daily struggle to feed and clothe their children, young men with hopes as ragged as their

³⁷ Mildred Liversedge, 15 September 1985; Left the CCF: *Pacific Tribune*, 24 April 1985, p. 3. Housewives' League: Effie Jones, WLHC. "The Housewives League was started by some women and a man of the Liberal Party. They did nothing but they met socially. Well, the times called for something more than that. We could see that the only way was to get into this Housewives' League and make it work. That's what I did and quite a lot of my friends and outsiders." See also *Vancouver Province*, 30 July 1938, p. 28 and 16 November 1939, p. 8. *People's Advocate*, 9 September 1938, p. 2 and 16 September 1938, p. 1. In civic politics Effie Jones is best remembered for her imaginative 1947 mayoralty campaign in which, as "Low-Fare" Jones opposing a B.C. Electric transit fare increase, she came within 4,900 votes of defeating Charles "High-Fare" Jones and becoming mayor of Vancouver. *Vancouver Sun*, 16 April 1985, p. A 12.

³⁸ Liversedge, ed. Hoar, p. viii.

clothes, reduced to begging on the street and arrested and put in jail for doing it. Compassionate women, they heard the missionary call to political work and obeyed.

The CCF women were similarly motivated by deeply felt conviction. They too were "true believers." The CCF, having already elected seven members to the Legislature, was convinced that it would be forming the next government of British Columbia and was pursuing the achievement of the new co-operative society with religious enthusiasm and missionary zeal. Members felt they belonged not to a political party but to a movement dedicated to changing human hearts and minds. Speaking about the relief camp workers on her radio program, Mildred Osterhout appealed to her listeners: "Join us in this endeavour to wipe out the relief camps and institute a new order of society with freedom and justice for all." And she further admonished them: "You must accept your responsibility of educating through every means possible those who still walk in the darkness of individual Capitalist thinking." Helena Gutteridge was equally explicit. Defending the representation of political parties on city councils, she declared:

The CCF is not a party in the conventional sense, but a part of a worldwide movement of forward-thinking men and women who can visualize a world in which co-operative effort will replace the present cut-throat competition, and in which security and plenty will replace poverty and insecurity.³⁹

Having already co-operated in the New Era League conference and in the CCF rally, left-wing women in Vancouver were ready to launch a specifically women's demonstration. The Mothers' Day Committee called its first mass meeting for 3 May to make plans for celebrating Mothers' Day in a manner appropriate to the concerns of all mothers in those troubled economic times. The Women's Labour League was quite explicit: "Such action will be something of real value instead of the usual bourgeois maudlin sentimentalism associated with Mother's Day."⁴⁰ Thus the Committee decided to act in a political way and to do so by employing a traditional form.

The Committee applied to city council for permission to hold a tag day to raise money. They were refused but went ahead anyway, and on 11 May collected nearly \$1,000 for the camp boys. The following day, Mothers' Day, the Committee led 1,500 relief camp workers from Cambie

³⁹ Osterhout: typescript of broadcast, 4 April 1935; Gutteridge: *Federationist*: 16 September 1937, p. 4. See also Walter Young, *Anatomy of a Party: The National CCF, 1932-1961* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), pp. 52-59.

⁴⁰ Sheils and Swankey, p. 96.

Street Grounds to Stanley Park. Their brigade of three hundred women stepped out smartly at the head of the parade, marching in time to the CCF Band and carrying a banner that read, "We the Mothers of Today Demand Abolition of the Relief Camps." In front of the banner strode four women pushing baby carriages. When the procession reached Malkin Bowl in Stanley Park, the women marched to an area roped off in the form of a huge heart and ranged themselves in outline around it. The relief camp workers then marched inside the heart and filled it. Some of them raised large placards bearing the letters which spelled out their message to the mothers: "Mothers Abolish the Relief Camps." The whole assembly sang "The Red Flag" and then broke up to sit on the grass and listen to speakers, Mrs. Peggy Harrison of the Women's Labour League presiding. Among the speakers was Sarah Colley, who emphasized that this was not a political demonstration, but simply a mothers' protest, and that governments should understand that the strikers were "Our Boys," not foreigners. "We Mothers are really aroused at the plight of the boys," she said, "and we'll keep right with them to the end of the road."⁴¹

Sarah Colley's statement poses a central question. Was the Mothers' Day Committee/Mothers' Council, as its name implies, a traditional women's auxiliary after all, assuming fundamentally a supportive, nurturing role? Sarah Colley makes it seem so. When she stood on that platform and claimed that the Mothers' Day rally was simply a mothers' protest, the audience probably found her statement quite credible. In his regular *Commonwealth* column "Pertinent Portraits," Barry Mather said:

She has a strangely effective way of speaking. Maybe it's the more than wee bit of Scotch accent that still clings to her tongue, although she has been away from the old land now these many years. Maybe it's her simple sincerity or the fact that she seems to have a knack of saying just the psychologically human thing at just the psychological moment.⁴²

Evidently this stout, little, grey-haired woman was one of those comforting people who reached out and, to borrow a phrase from Dylan Thomas, put her "arms round the griefs of the ages."

On the other hand, mothers carrying a banner demanding the abolition of the relief camps are patently engaged in political demonstration. Sarah Colley was not so innocent as to be unaware that as "CCF

⁴¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 13 May 1935, p. 5; *Commonwealth*, 10 May 1935, p. 5 and 17 May 1935, p. 1.

⁴² 23 May 1935, p. 6. The collected portraits are in Barry Mather, *Pertinent Portraits: C.C.F. 1934*, ill. Fraser Wilson (Vancouver: The Boag Foundation, n.d.). Sarah Colley's portrait is not included.

Mother" she was playing a most useful political role. In considering who should be the speaker for the Mothers' Day event, her colleagues surely thought of her as the obvious choice, for she had already filled the same role when she represented the impoverished mothers on the 1934 delegation of the B.C. Joint Committee on Unemployment and when she led the parade of 2,000 women to the CCF Arena Rally two weeks earlier.

In Alberta and Saskatchewan during the On-to-Ottawa Trek, women's committees were also set up, the word "Mother," observes Joan Sangster, again being used "as an organizing catchword."

In Regina after the Riot, a Mothers' Committee, led by Communist women . . . was formed to visit the imprisoned Trekkers and lobby for their release. Some 'mothers' on the Committee . . . were actually single unemployed women, but the Committee's name was less a statement of personnel and more an attempt to appeal, on an emotional level, to homemakers who were concerned about the future of their children.⁴³

If the Mothers' Council considered Sarah Colley's motherliness an asset, they would not have been cynical, merely astute. They were not without their own maternal feelings, for most of them were mothers too. The Committee, having arranged for the strikers to be invited to Sunday dinner in homes throughout the city after the Mothers' Day rally, found that so many women had sent out invitations that there weren't enough willing strikers to go around. Some women even further opened their homes to the men, giving them a place to sleep and making them part of the family for a time. The Mothers' Day Committee and the large group of women they organized were touched by the tragedy of so many wasted young lives and were resolved to help in a practical and human way which, because of the economic source of the tragedy, coincided with their political task as socialists.

Quite aside from the ambivalence surrounding Sarah Colley as "CCF Mother," some of the work the Mothers' Council would undertake could without any ambiguity be labelled "women's work," by the standards of that earlier generation, at least. They raised money for the Regina Defence of the On-to-Ottawa trekkers who had been jailed, provided socks and underwear and cash for blacklisted men, held bazaars, dinners and picnics. Ronald Liversedge recalls with some nostalgia the 1938 Mothers' Day picnic the Council arranged for the boys. More than 4,000 gathered at Lumberman's Arch in Stanley Park to partake of the ample provisions, join in the community singing, play softball, and listen to one

⁴³ Sangster, "Canadian Women." Subsequent references to Sunday dinner, etc.: Sheils and Swankey, p. 95; interview with Elspeth Gardner.

of the boys, newly released from prison, urge solidarity and singleness of purpose.⁴⁴

However, a distinction must be made between espousing the ideology of maternal feminism and giving expression to human compassion, surely universal among both men and women, and appealing to that feeling in others. These women did not see themselves as being endowed with special feminine qualities that made them uniquely qualified to nurture the world. They were not descended from suffragist and social reformer Nellie McClung, who declared, "Women were intended to guide and sustain life, to care for the race; not feed on it."⁴⁵

True, a dedication to socialism does not necessarily prevent one from accommodating, however illogically, this main tenet of maternal feminism. The idea of Woman as a civilizing influence, the ultimate saviour of the world at the brink of nuclear holocaust, informs the thinking of many thoughtful people today. Thus it would not be surprising if some such strand of maternal feminism did linger on among women of the thirties. Helena Gutteridge, Mary Norton and Susan Lane Clark had been suffragists during the first decades of the century when this view of women provided one of the rationales for women's enfranchisement. These three were socialists, as were Sarah Colley and Elizabeth Kerr. All believed, along with younger socialist women like Mildred Osterhout and Grace MacInnis, who had grown up with the vote, that the liberation of women could only be accomplished when the new co-operative commonwealth had replaced capitalist society. The profound intellectual involvement of these women in Marxism, a central topic in the CCF education program of the thirties, precluded their espousing the apotheosis of the female of the species. Mildred Osterhout is a case in point. In one of her radio talks, "Raising your Son to be a Socialist," she makes it quite clear that the educative responsibility of mothers is a function of their social role as parents, not of an innate special feminine quality: "Our hope for the future lies in those of us who are teachers and who have the care of young children, facing up to the task of influencing them in the formation of social attitudes and behavior responses." Helena Gutteridge thought of the undeveloped potential of housewives and of how they could contribute to the work of the world, a point of view compatible with Marxism:

⁴⁴ Liversedge, p. 69. He does not recall the Mothers' Council as sponsors of the picnic, but this is made clear in the *Federationist*, 12 May 1938, p. 1 and *People's Advocate*, 12 May 1938, p. 5.

⁴⁵ "Gentle Lady," in Nellie McClung, *In Times Like These*, with an introduction by Veronica Strong-Boag (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1972), p. 64.

No matter how busy they may be with their families and homes, women are part of the larger community. They owe it to themselves to develop their abilities and to work for a better, peaceful world.

Both would have agreed with Grace MacInnis:

The first thing that any man or any woman needs in the line of liberation is to be liberated from the idea that they're just a man or just a woman. It's nice to be a woman if you're a woman, and nice to be a man, if you're a man. But there's something much better than being just either, and that's being a full human being. And I don't think that as long as you're clinging either to your masculinity or your femininity that you're making progress toward becoming a full human being.⁴⁶

In her analysis of the ideologies of socialist and communist women during the latter half of the 1930s, Joan Sangster adopts the phrase 'militant mothering' to describe a blend of maternal feminism and various kinds of socialism — Fabian, Marxist, Leninist, Christian. Of the women in the CCF, she says:

Like the earlier 'maternal feminists' socialist women often saw women's political interests as an extension of their domestic maternal concerns; yet, in contrast to the earlier suffragists, the political outlook of socialist women, with its emphasis on class issues and militant action is better characterized as 'militant mothering'.⁴⁷

It seems clear that, if the CCF women's emphasis was on "class issues and militant action," they should not have an epithet applied to them that describes a subordinate element in their ideology, if indeed a practical interest in domestic issues can be termed maternal feminism. The term 'militant mothering' is also a misnomer as applied to communist women of this time. With the Comintern's inauguration of the Popular Front policy in 1935, Party women were urged to go into the community and participate in women's organizations, seeking common ground in traditional women's concerns such as child care, consumer issues, education, war and peace. This tactic for establishing a base for proselytizing Joan Sangster labels "maternalism," maintaining that in its endeavour to politicize housewives by appealing to their special interests, the Party came "dangerously close" to asserting that a woman's place was in the home. But she also astutely observes that "the Party's invocation of maternalism always had an opportunistic edge to it: women's organization was encouraged, not simply for its intrinsic value to women's emancipation, but

⁴⁶ Osterhout, 3 July 1933. Gutteridge: *Pacific Tribune*, 8 March 1957, p. 12. MacInnis: interview with Anne Scotton, 164: 1, UBCL.

⁴⁷ Sangster, "Canadian Women," p. 190.

because women were seen as crucial ingredients to a successful Popular Front coalition." She says further that the communist women "quite justly distinguished themselves from a 'bourgeois' mentality which confined women to the home, ignored class issues, and avoided militant action." It should be added that this political distancing, in which a sense of superiority was implicit, allowed communist women to exploit motherhood for its emotional value while being quite genuine in their community work and walking with confidence the moral tightrope of the true believer. The struggle of opposites inherent in this situation is immediately obvious to any student of Marxist dialectics, and Joan Sangster does conclude that "the Popular Front was a time of contradiction for the CPC's work among women."⁴⁸ But it is clear from the evidence adduced in her essay that if CPC women in the later thirties did not advance the cause of women according to the best tenets of Marx and Lenin, it was from revolutionary zeal in carrying out popular front policy, not from a change in ideology. In the case of the Vancouver communist women, the WLL's rejection of "the bourgeois maudlin sentimentalism associated with Mothers' Day" makes their position clear. In sum, for the Vancouver Mothers' Day Committee/Mothers' Council, maternal feminism, to the extent that it was present, was only an occasional coloured strand in the ideological fabric.

* * *

The Committee followed up their Mothers' Day demonstration by pressuring the mayor and city council to take action. Within the week a delegation from the Committee went to city hall and demanded a hearing. Council refusing to listen to them, they collared Mayor McGeer in the hallway. He told them that the city was not empowered to grant relief to the single unemployed transients. A woman objected that "it was the law of God that men should be fed." The mayor replied that the law of God wouldn't work in city council. When the delegates reported this to the next meeting of the Mothers' Committee, they decided that the Reverend Andrew Roddan, in whose church the mayor was scheduled to speak, should hear of this. The minister was a champion of the unemployed and often went down among the hoboies in their "jungles" to get to know them. His church brought food to them, setting up a kind of daily soup kitchen. Incensed at his refusal to cancel the service, the women attended First United Church in a body, filling all the pews. When McGeer rose to speak, they walked out en masse. A few days later, led by Sarah Colley

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 282, 288, 319, 323.

and Peggy Harrison, they simply marched to city hall, right past the guard and up to the fifth floor, where they demanded to see the mayor. He was not in. They waited an hour before being shown out of city hall.

Still determined that the boys should not go hungry, the women returned to the Majestic Hall where a decision was made to interview [Police] Chief Foster and remain in the police station until assurance was given that every boy had something to eat and a place to sleep. After more than two hours the assurance was made and the women dispersed.⁴⁹

Early in June the Mothers' Day Committee decided to continue as a group to support the relief camp strikers. The men had just set out on their trek to Ottawa, where they intended to place their demands before Prime Minister Bennett. They did not reach their destination. On 1 July in Regina's Market Square, police and unemployed confronted one another, and the bloody battle which followed brought to an uneasy conclusion the relief camp workers' strike.

By August the Mothers' Day Committee had changed its name to the "Vancouver Mothers' Council." Its recognition as a public presence with some authority is evident from the reception accorded the women by Liberal MLA Gordon Wismer when a delegation visited him in August. They convinced him there was no justification for blacklisting the men and appealed to his compassion. He, in turn, gave them a letter to carry back to Acting Mayor Tisdall, urging him to "make representations to the proper authorities."⁵⁰ The Mothers' Council also made representations to Vancouver City Council, in the case of Ethel Evans, wife of the leader of the On-to-Ottawa Trek. Arthur Evans had been arrested after the 1 July battle in Regina and charged with acting "as an Officer of an unlawful association, to wit, the Relief Camp Workers' Union. . . ." On this account his wife and small daughter were being denied relief. The Mothers' Council intervened on their behalf and after a two-month dispute with the Relief Department and city council were successful.⁵¹

After the unemployment crisis of the summer of 1935 had subsided, interest in the Mothers' Council waned, the non-left element withdrew, and probably the CCF as well, leaving a core of communist women to carry on until the second major crisis — the Post Office sit-down strike in

⁴⁹ *B.C. Workers' News*, 23 May 1935, p. 2. Both the church and police station incidents are described by Lil Stoneman, WLHC. See also *B.C. Workers' News*, 17 May 1935, p. 2: *Commonwealth*, 23 May 1935, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Decided to continue: *B.C. Workers' News*, 7 June 1935, p. 2. Changed its name, Wismer: *Commonwealth*, 23 August 1935, p. 1.

⁵¹ Charged: Sheils and Swankey, p. 197. Obtained relief: *Commonwealth*, 15 November 1935, p. 8.

May 1938. It is not known why CCF women withdrew.⁵² It seems likely they had other priorities in the CCF. Certainly leading CCF women — Mildred Osterhout, Helena Gutteridge, Elizabeth Kerr, Susan Lane Clark — were at this time running for public office and/or emerging as committee and executive members in the CCF. During these three years, the Mothers' Council was less a pressure group than a service and educational organization. At first its declared concern was with "interesting women in their own problems and those of the victims of the present system." The Council invited speakers to address them on the subject of birth control, unemployment and other contemporary issues, while continuing to provide material support for the blacklisted men in the form of socks, underwear and other clothing. Members also raised money for the defence of the jailed Trekkers. In 1936, when, with a membership of seventy-five, they applied for affiliation with the Local Council of Women, their restated purpose was "to advance the economic, social and cultural interests of the common people." As an affiliate, it was able to work within the parent organization in support of the unemployed. The Local Council of Women by this time had its own Unemployment Relief Committee, on which Susan Clark was the socialist voice.⁵³

The Mothers' Council did not, however, altogether abandon their strategy of needling the community conscience through direct action. One October Sunday morning in 1936, a parade of seventy unemployed men led by thirty women could be seen filing into St. Andrew's Wesley United Church. The Mothers' Council was confronting the church community with the problem of the single unemployed. In the afternoon the men attended the service at Four-Square Gospel Tabernacle on their own and shared in its Harvest Festival, but in the evening the women were on duty again, this time to lead 150 men into Christ Church Cathedral, where they were welcomed by the Very Reverend Ramsay Armitage. On another occasion thirty city waitresses were thrown out of work by a city bylaw that forbade white girls to work in Chinese restaurants. A Mothers' Council committee accompanied the waitresses to city hall to demand that the question be reopened. Thus the Mothers' Council maintained a

⁵² This withdrawal is suggested by the establishment by CCF women in 1938 of a new umbrella organization, the Women's Emergency Committee to Aid the Single Unemployed.

⁵³ Declared concern: *Commonwealth*, 22 November 1935, p. 2. Speakers: *Commonwealth*, 26 November 1935, p. 2; *B.C. Workers' News*, 28 February 1936, p. 3; 27 August 1935, p. 2. Material support: *ibid.*, 6 December 1935, p. 2; 11 February 1935, p. 3; 21 February 1936, p. 3; 6 March 1936, p. 3. Affiliation: Vancouver Local Council of Women Papers (VLCW), Minutes, 4 May 1936 and 14 September 1936, 4.16, UBCL.

working organization that would be ready to mobilize for action during the Post Office sit-down strike in the spring of 1938.⁵⁴

In 1937 unemployment was down considerably from what it had been in 1936 or, indeed, any year since 1929. Although in 1938 the upward swing in the economy was not sustained (in British Columbia there was an increase of 7,000 in the number on relief), conditions were better than they had been for some years.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the summer of 1938 was to bring a showdown in Vancouver between government and the unemployed — the Post Office sit-down strike.

A work scheme operated by the city in co-operation with the province was halted in the early spring after the province refused to continue to pay its share of the costs, thus virtually abandoning the single unemployed to the care of the city. When the provincial government also shut down its work project camps on 1 May, and the logging camps closed for an extended period because of an exceptionally dry summer, the time became ripe for a confrontation.⁵⁶ On 20 May the unemployed marched again in Vancouver, this time occupying three buildings: the Hotel Georgia, the Art Gallery and the Post Office. Mayor Miller said the sit-down strike was not a civic responsibility and left to spend the weekend with his family on Bowen Island.

The men bivouacked in the Post Office and the Art Gallery for a month (the group occupying the Hotel Georgia evacuated the building earlier when promised \$500 for food). The success of this desperate strategy depended, of course, on their having access to a regular food supply. In this, the Mothers' Council played a crucial role, for clearly if the men had not been provided with food, they could not have held out. As in the 1935 strike, the traditional nurturing role assumed by the women was charged with political content. And, as before, they also took direct action. "You hold the fort and we'll see that you are fed," the Mothers' Council promised. They were as good as their word. The day after the men entered the buildings the women were preparing food in

⁵⁴ Church parades: *B.C. Workers' News*, 23 October 1936, p. 3. Waitresses: *People's Advocate*, 1 October 1937, p. 1.

⁵⁵ A DBS survey showed that "based on the 1926 average as 100, the 1938 index averaged 111.8 as compared with 114.1 in 1937 and 103.7 in 1936." *CAR*, 1937 and 1938, p. 394. See also pp. 395 and 509.

⁵⁶ City work scheme: *Federationist*, 17 March 1938, p. 1. George S. Pearson, B.C. Minister of Labour, gave a summary of government policy and its application to provincial work camps in a radio address reported in the *Vancouver Sun*, 27 June 1938, p. 22.

the kitchen of the Disabled Veterans' Hall on Homer Street and having it delivered by truck to the men.⁵⁷

But now the CCF women, seeing the need to reconstitute an organization like the original Mothers' Day Committee in order to draw on the resources of the whole community during this crisis, formed the Vancouver Women's Emergency Committee to Aid the Single Unemployed. In this they had the co-operation of the Mothers' Council, which for the duration of the strike worked under the new umbrella organization. The CCF women, some of whom were in public office, knew that it would be politically inappropriate and ineffectual for them to approach the Mothers' Council and ask to be re-admitted. The communist women doubtless recognized that, despite their own worthy work for the unemployed, the CCF women had more public credibility than they. Although the Council was now part of a larger group, it provided a good deal of impetus for the new enterprise. Indeed, the women's part in the Post Office sit-down strike is remembered under the rubric of the Mothers' Council, even by CCF women who participated. The Council had, after all, established a public presence in the crisis of 1935 and remained on the scene, however reduced in numbers and influence, to take visible direct action on behalf of the unemployed over the longer period, 1935 to 1938.⁵⁸

With Betty Kerr as chairperson and Effie Jones secretary, the new Committee, composed for all practical purposes of the CCF Women's Central Group and the Mothers' Council, appealed to women throughout Vancouver to come to the aid of the strikers. Volunteers from the Liberal Women's Association, the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and a number of church groups responded and subsequently assembled with the left-wing women and labour union people at the Ukrainian Labour Temple to be part of the work crew preparing food. Largely anonymous helpers, these volunteers were probably also assigned to canvassing business for donations of food. It is not likely that people from non-left organizations, nor even from the Relief Project Workers' Union, were on the executive of the Emergency Committee. The men certainly counted on the women for help and kept them in touch with developments. The Women's Emergency Committee met daily in an office next door to CCF headquarters to plan ways of mobilizing more support for the men, both

⁵⁷ *People's Advocate*, 27 May 1938, p. 1.

⁵⁸ WEC: *ibid.*, p. 6. Impetus: Effie Jones, WLHC; Mildred Liversedge, 15 September 1985; interview with Hilda Kristiansen, 3 April 1983.

practical and political. The Relief Project Workers' Union sent its men out to gather donations of food, but the women conducted their own campaign as well, visiting Vancouver storekeepers and cafe owners with soliciting sheets. The food thus gathered was delivered to their new headquarters, the Ukrainian Labour Temple on East Pender Street, where forty or fifty women at a time were on duty preparing salads and sandwiches and other simple meals. The men then delivered the food by truck to the Post Office.⁵⁹

Two weeks later, when the mayor announced in council that the policy of the authorities was to wait out the strike, Helena Gutteridge underlined the political importance of the women's work with this rejoinder: "If you think you are going to starve them [the sit-downers] out, you are mistaken, because the women intend to see that these boys are fed." The strikers too recognized just how vital were the efforts of the women to the success of Operation Sit-Down: at their sports day and concert in the Post Office lobby, they singled out the head of the Mothers' Council, Mrs. Mildred Lusk, from among the guests and presented her with a bouquet of flowers.⁶⁰

After the strike had been in progress for nearly two weeks, it became necessary to decide just how long to continue supporting the strikers. The Women's Emergency Committee called a special meeting of women in St. Andrew's Wesley Church. With Laura Jamieson, former Burnaby juvenile court judge, in the chair, the 150 women heard Dorothy Steeves, CCF MLA, declare that "the authorities expected the people of Vancouver to get tired feeding the men, but that the people must not get tired till the matter had been settled." She urged "a short range policy of assistance for the men, and a long range one of pressure on governments for a works program, immediately." The meeting decided to keep up a steady supply of food for the men and appointed a contact committee to involve more women in canvassing work. The meeting also passed a resolution, moved by Helena Gutteridge, asking that a federal works scheme be inaugurated without delay and that the men participating in it be paid at union rates. Mayor Miller, as special guest, also spoke. Completely out of touch with the prevailing sympathy for the strikers throughout the city, he observed that the men had lost public support by

⁵⁹ Secretary: Mrs. E. Jones to Chief Constable Foster, 17 June 1938, VCPD, File 28, Loc. 75 (F) 2, VCA. Volunteers: *Federationist*, 9 June 1938, p. 5. Food: *Vancouver Sun*, 21 May 1938, p. 1; 25 May 1938, p. 1; 28 May 1938, p. 3. The Relief Project Workers' Union replaced the Relief Camp Workers' Union.

⁶⁰ Gutteridge: *People's Advocate*, 3 June 1938, p. 6. Lusk: *Post Office Sitdowners' Gazette*, vol. 1, no. 2, E. E. Winch Personal Papers, 55a.25, AMMC.

their action in taking over a public building and declaring that “they could set [*sic*] there for all summer as far as he was concerned.” Cries of “No, No!” and “Sit down!” interrupted him, and the chair had to ask for order before he could continue.⁶¹

With the new impetus from this meeting, the Women’s Emergency Committee sponsored a mass meeting at Powell Street grounds where 5,000 people gathered on 12 June to hear Harold Winch, Dr. Lyle Telford, Mildred Osterhout and Laura Jamieson urge them to support the single unemployed in their effort to obtain work and wages. Mildred Lusk, president of the Mothers’ Council, chaired the meeting.⁶²

Mayor Miller saw the sit-down strike as a communist strategy for fomenting unrest and accused the Mothers’ Council of being led by communists. The women wrote to city council, refuting the charge and deploring the easy resort to the red smear to discredit any and all persons or groups seeking to help the unemployed.⁶³ Certainly local communists were to be found leading many groups, especially since a united front was by then the declared policy of the CPC. Implementation of that policy meant that party members, “the vanguard,” considering themselves more politically advanced than other people, sought membership in a wide range of political and non-political organizations and worked with other communists as the “party fraction” in any given group. They even joined the CCF to try to influence it — “infiltrated,” in other words. To this Sarah Colley took strong objection:

They [the communists] are a hindrance to our progress and should be dealt with accordingly. Why doesn’t the Communist party mind their business and leave the CCF alone, as the CCF is decidedly the people’s front, having proven so in the past. We have nothing to fear if we stick by the policy of the CCF.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, as vice-president of the CCF Women’s Central Group, Sarah Colley would have been working with Betty Kerr in the Women’s Emergency Committee and the Mothers’ Council, and, for all her opposition to the united front, would also have been working alongside communist women.

On the other hand, the Women’s Labour League had been dwindling in membership for several years. At their 1935 convention they disaffili-

⁶¹ *Federationist*, 2 June 1938, p. 1; *People’s Advocate*, 3 June 1938, pp. 1 and 6.

⁶² *Vancouver Sun*, 13 June 1938, p. 9.

⁶³ Miller: *Vancouver Sun*, 6 July 1938, p. 3. Deploring: *Federationist*, 14 July 1938, p. 2.

⁶⁴ *Federationist*, 5 April 1937, p. 6. On party fractions see Avakumovic, p. 34.

ated with the Workers' Unity League, then disbanding, to seek a broader sphere of action. The following year they applied to affiliate with the Vancouver Local Council of Women, and after some delay were accepted.⁶⁵ In joining the VLCW, a "bourgeois" organization, they were implementing the new popular front policy officially adopted by the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in July and August 1935. Lil Stoneman, secretary of the Vancouver Women's Labour League, recalls how their popular front policy evolved:

Becky Buhay [a Communist Party organizer] came from Toronto. . . . We had meetings and we decided they [the Women's Labour League] weren't getting any bigger. And it did broaden out. And in fact we were accepted in the Local Council of Women, to our big surprise. And I think it was Mrs. Stewart who went on to the platform. There was to be a National Council [of Women] meeting here and we [herself and another woman] were invited to the evening and the government officials came. Professor Weir came, whom I'd known in Saskatchewan years before. He was the Minister of Education here. He gave me a big kiss.⁶⁶

For Lil Stoneman, secretary of the Women's Labour League, that kiss was the accolade. She and her friends were now members in good standing in a "broad" organization. Here was the popular front in action.

With the CCF, however, the CPC from 1935 on sought a united front; that is, an alliance with a workers' social reform party, for that is how they characterized the CCF, in contrast to their own perception of themselves as the revolutionary party of Marxism. The British Columbia CCF in convention in July 1937 decided to reject the overtures of the Communist Party to form an alliance on the grounds that the CCF itself was the united front of the farmer-labour-socialist movement. But the hard truth was that, similar though their programs were in many respects, the two parties were rivals for the support of the working class. Indeed, according to one CCF historian, "the aim of the Communists was not co-operation with the CCF for the achievement of socialism, but the absorption of the CCF by the Communist Party."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Dwindling: Lil Stoneman, WLHC and Mildred Liversedge. According to Tom McEwen, Annie Stewart and a few other women wanted to keep the League going (interview by Sue Lockhart, September 1975). Disaffiliated: *B.C. Workers' News*, 29 November 1935, p. 3. WUL disbanding: Paul A. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver: B.C. Federation of Labour and Boag Foundation, 1967), pp. 110-12. VLCW: Minutes, 4 May 1936, 2 November 1936, 4 October 1937, 4.16.

⁶⁶ WLHC interview.

⁶⁷ *Federationist*, 28 January 1937, p. 7. Young, p. 263. For the convention decision see the *Federationist* editorial, 8 July 1937, p. 4, cited by Dorothy Steeves, *The*

Vancouver CCF women acted in violation of their party's policy during the Post Office sit-down strike when they formed their own united front with CPC women. There was ample precedent for shared discussion and even common action in the Western Women's Conferences (1924-32) where women from various labour parties were able to meet, until 1929, with communist women and to consult and sometimes act together on behalf of working-class women. In Toronto in 1936, the Women's Joint Committee was an explicitly united front organization of CCF and communist women. In Vancouver CCF women leaders were far from hostile to the Communist Party. Betty Kerr had even, the year before while on a visit to the Soviet Union, sent a message to "all progressive parties in British Columbia" urging them to "weld themselves together in the face of the coming provincial election." The CCF women were well aware of the delicate political balance that had to be achieved in a partnership with CPC women. Even though Annie Stewart, Effie Jones and Elsie Munro scarcely fitted the stereotype of Communist Party manipulators employing devious stratagems for their own political ends, for CCF women the protection of their autonomy was a central concern in the formation of the Women's Emergency Committee and in the central role assigned to themselves at their mass meeting in St. Andrew's Wesley Church. Rather than allowing themselves to be manipulated, Betty Kerr, Helena Gutteridge, Sarah Colley and other CCF women were doing the pragmatic thing demanded of them by the situation, for a split among left-wing women would feed no strikers. By working with CPC women, who also were genuinely interested in the welfare of the unemployed, they were achieving that "unity of purpose expressive of ideals higher than that of personalities or factions" which was the declared aim of the CCF Women's Central Group.⁶⁸

* * *

On the morning of 19 June 1938 the single unemployed were forcibly evicted from the Post Office by tear gas and truncheons. Members of the Women's Emergency Committee were immediately summoned for help. "We tore up sheets to make bandages and set up a first-aid station in the Ukrainian Labour Temple," recalls Mildred Liversedge. "We got all the

Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada (Vancouver: J. J. Douglas Ltd., 1977), p. 116. For the decision of the CCF provincial executive, see Minutes, 16 January 1937, 46.1, AMMC.

⁶⁸ WWC: Sangster, "Canadian Women," p. 167. WJC: Manley, pp. 100-18. Kerr: *People's Advocate*, 21 May 1937, p. 3. Unity of purpose: 11 February 1937, p. 6.

men to lie outside on the lawn. They were vomiting; it took all day for them to recover."⁶⁹

In the following days the Women's Emergency Committee also took it upon themselves to be among the mediators between the strikers and the provincial government. At midnight on Eviction Day a delegation of one hundred men, the first of several contingents, marched onto the midnight boat, en route to Victoria to put their case to the Premier. A cheering crowd of six or seven thousand gathered at Pier D to see them off, lustily singing "Hold the Fort."

Cheers were given frequently. There were cheers for Steve Brodie, the post office leader who went to hospital, cheers for the Mothers' Council and the Women's Emergency Committee. There were cheers for the Communist Party, but rather weak.

Biggest cheer of all went to Harold Winch, M.L.A., who appeared on the ramp to deliver a parting speech.⁷⁰

After the boat sailed, the crowd surged up the street to the Post Office and threatened a disturbance. Once again Harold Winch found the words to subdue them, and again violence was averted. But the word went out to the rest of Vancouver and British Columbia that the city had suffered great property losses, was in the control of the mob or was terrorized by the police. Little wonder that Victoria awaited in trepidation the arrival of contingents of relief camp workers.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Summoned: Mildred Liversedge; Effie Jones, WLHC. Mildred Liversedge says she was one of the women gassed during the Vancouver longshoremen's strike in 1935. The incident is described in "*Man Along the Shore!*" — *the Story of the Vancouver Waterfront*, consultant and writer, Ben Swankey (Vancouver: ILWU Local 500 Pensioners, n.d.), p. 84: "The Longshoremen's Women's Auxiliary established a first-aid post in the Longshoremen's Hall to treat the injured. Police smashed the windows and hurled tear gas bombs inside."

⁷⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 20 June 1938, p. 5.

⁷¹ Control of mob, trepidation: *Vancouver Sun*, 21 June 1938, p. 1. The following two paragraphs are also based on this *Sun* report, which is an example of how the serious political actions of women can be so frivolously treated as to radically diminish those actions and make the women invisible to history. The reporter assigned to accompany the women dealt with the purpose of the delegation in one sentence. For the rest of his report he exploited the perceived anomaly inherent in a group of married women engaged in a democratic political activity as earnest as seeking to speak with the elected head of their government. They were "staid." They were disarming. They were so disarming they wrapped a CPR policeman around their collective little finger: he sent stewards for pillows and blankets (for the women could not afford staterooms), and before he knew what he was doing he was arranging the pillows for them on the floor of the foyer where they could stretch out comfortably. They even managed to "wangle" a cup of tea before disembarking. Ten mothers asleep on the foyer floor of the *Princess Joan* does present a comical image, as would ten fathers, ten seagulls, ten of any creature

The Women's Emergency Committee sent ten women to Victoria on the next midnight boat to see the Premier and demand work and wages and immediate relief for the single unemployed. It is clear that it was still functioning as an umbrella group in which the Mothers' Council, sending four of the ten delegates, was predominant. For the Women's Emergency Committee, Hilda Kristiansen of the CCF balanced Ethel Evans. Betty Kerr from the CCF Women's Central Group was one of the co-ordinators of the enterprise with Mothers' Council president, Mildred Lusk. Other delegates represented the Ukrainian Farmer-Labour Association, the Women's Auxiliary of the Pacific Coast Fishermen's Union, and the Women's Labour League. Sarah Colley, whose opposition to the Communist Party has been noted, was not part of the delegation. The fact that Maurice Rush,⁷² secretary of the Young Communist League, accompanied the women suggests that since 1935 the Mothers' Council had moved further to the left.

"TEN VANCOUVER MOTHERS JOIN VICTORIA TREK," announced the *Vancouver Sun* over a two-column front-page story. The contingent of one hundred men who had gone to Victoria the night before met them when they disembarked. The women fell into their accustomed place, leading the procession of men up Belleville and Government Streets, the whole company singing "Hold the Fort." Premier Pattullo refused to see the women, but, significantly, chose to account for his refusal: "The mothers' council, I understand, applied for a meeting with me but I had them informed to submit their suggestions in writing. I am not granting interviews to every organization that come[s] along."

In the end Pattullo did see them, although not until the next day. Always enterprising, always persistent, the women appealed to the Victoria Ministerial Association, one of whose members agreed to intercede with the Premier on their behalf. In the meantime, the women addressed a meeting of three hundred in Victoria's Central Park. Then they sailed home, leaving Betty Kerr and Mildred Lusk to carry on. These two, supported by seven members of the newly-formed Victoria Women's Emergency Committee and two men, the Reverend Bryce Wallace and CCF MLA Sam Guthrie, met the Premier and Minister of Labour George Pearson the next afternoon. The Premier was adamant: he would not

lined up in a row. But to the *Vancouver Sun* reporter the mothers were comic because women didn't customarily take political responsibility, much less behave in so unconventional a manner.

⁷² Now Provincial Secretary of the British Columbia Communist Party.

change his policy and demonstrations would serve no purpose. The women threw the ball into his court by asking what the men would do if the women stopped providing them with food. But the Premier was willing to deal with them only on the most superficial level and countered by asking in turn "why they should stop such worthy work." "We didn't gain anything," reported Betty Kerr after the meeting, "but we told the Premier and Mr. Pearson a few things they didn't know."⁷³

Returning to Vancouver, the Women's Emergency Committee continued to make their presence felt. In the 1935 relief camp workers' strike, the Mothers' Council had sent delegations to see the mayor. Since then, Helena Gutteridge had been elected to city council. With their own socialist representative on the inside, the Women's Emergency Committee found a new way to challenge the mayor and his Non-Partisan Association aldermen. The Committee had written to city council condemning alleged police brutality in the eviction of the sit-downers. Helena Gutteridge would have known when the city clerk was to read the letter; thus it was no accident that thirty women from the Committee were in the gallery that afternoon. The ensuing encounter was reported as follows:

Ald. Gutteridge demanded an investigation.

Ald. H. L. Corey stated the matters were under investigation.

Said Ald. Fred Crone: 'People looking for publicity. . . .'

'Making a hullabaloo about nothing,' interrupted Mayor G. C. Miller.

'Boo!' cried a loud contralto from the gallery of the council chamber. The gallery was jammed with women.

. . . Sergeant-at-Arms Alex. McKay galloped upstairs and stood, looking perplexedly at the rows of women.

'I'll clear the chamber if you can't behave as [*sic*] ladies,' the Mayor said, as boos and jeers were heard. 'You can boo me at your meetings, but can't here.'

'I've given you the facts privately, now I'll do it publicly,' Ald. de Graves told Ald. Guttridge [*sic*]. He praised the police for moderation at the Post Office, Art Gallery, Police Station and CPR dock on Eviction Sunday.

'The police were called filthy names. I never saw anything like their forbearance,' he said.

'If they hadn't beaten the men in the post office, nothing would have hap-

⁷³ *Daily Colonist*, 22 June 1938, p. 16. Worthy work: *Federationist*, 30 June 1938, p. 5. Didn't gain: *Vancouver Sun*, 22 June 1938, p. 16.

pened,' declared Ald. Guttridge [*sic*]. 'I want to know if they were instructed to do it. . . .'

The women left the gallery.⁷⁴

Whether or not one approves of such strategies or considers them effective, it must be acknowledged that they are characteristic, not of the traditional women's auxiliary, but of a political direct action group.

Pattullo eventually had to make concessions, providing temporary relief to single, able-bodied men, whether domiciled in British Columbia or not, and assigning non-transients to temporary work projects. In the fall the men continued to roam the province looking for work, continued to confront governments with their demands for work and wages. The Women's Emergency Committee, having served its purpose, presumably ceased functioning; at any rate, by the end of the summer of 1938 nothing more is heard of it in the press. The Mothers' Council was left to carry on as the women's advocate for the unemployed during the fall of 1938. As before, the Council also continued to come to the aid of impoverished families. Gradually, over the next year, the Council petered out. It seems likely that some of its energies were transferred to the Vancouver Housewives' League in which Effie Jones was then much involved and Annie Stewart, a charter member.⁷⁵ With unemployment no longer a problem, the Mothers' Council may have been replaced by the Housewives' League as a popular front organization alert to the new problems of wartime Canada.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 28 June 1938, p. 9. The mayor's second remark is interpolated from the *Vancouver Daily Province*, 28 June 1938, p. 8.

⁷⁵ Concessions: *Vancouver Sun*, 8 July 1938, p. 1; 9 July 1938, p. 1; *Federationist*, 14 July 1938, p. 1. Council carries on: *People's Advocate*, 19 August 1938, p. 6; *Commonwealth*, 27 October 1938, p. 1. Stewart: *Pacific Tribune*, 23 February 1951, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Effie Jones made the Housewives' League known across Canada, even in high places. In the winter of 1940-41, price controls had been imposed by the Canadian government on certain commodities, including some foods. According to a first-hand account, the chairman of the Combines Investigation Board, which worked with the Wartime Prices and Trade Board, addressed a class in economics at Queen's University. A student asked him why the government didn't leave food prices to the free market to encourage farmers to produce as much as possible for the war effort. The answer came without hesitation: "Should we do that, within the hour there would be a telegram from Mrs. Effie Jones of the Vancouver Housewives' League." Interview with Emil Bjarnason, 5 September 1985. According to Sara Diamond (p. 295), Women's Auxiliaries of the International Woodworkers of America in British Columbia "united with consumer groups to lobby Ottawa for price controls, milk subsidies, rent controls, low-cost housing, farm subsidies and a peacetime price regulation agency."

The Mothers' Council had done their best. They had exploited the received idea of motherhood and embraced a new one with such genuine conviction that thousands rallied with them around the struggles of the unemployed. They had been sensitive to the political dynamics of the time, in their protean way changing shape and structure in order to pursue their own united front policy and draw in as many non-left sympathizers as possible. They had accepted the work of feeding the strikers, understanding that the political dimensions of that work demanded it be performed with energy and imagination. They had paraded and demonstrated, addressed mass meetings and confronted the authorities to make them listen, and when these measures failed, adopted militant tactics. But despite their efforts and those of every other concerned citizen group and of every government, no solution was found until the following year when Canada went to war. Then there was work for everyone, no matter where they were domiciled, though many were killed doing it.