

Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver 1900-1915

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The history of women in the labour force is by and large a neglected area of study, especially with regard to trade unionism. For British Columbia in the early years of this century, while there are various accounts of men's union struggles, there does not exist at present any published secondary material on the union activity of women. This article will attempt to give a preliminary account of the organization of some women workers in Vancouver during the period from 1900 to 1915.

Research on such a topic is full of problems. Women's organizing efforts are recorded in scattered fashion throughout old labour newspapers and minutes of meetings, but the records are fragmentary and often ambiguous. It is extremely rare to find accounts by the women themselves, so their motivations are often a matter of speculation. The failure of historians and trade unionists of the time to record women's activities has contributed to a present lack of knowledge of this area. The main chronicles of labour history in B.C. and Canada ignore the very existence of women workers, let alone their union activity.¹ The earlier failure to record information probably stemmed from a belief that women's struggles were unimportant or insignificant in a historical context. The failure of later historians to retrieve what data exist seems to reflect this same belief.

As a consequence of this ignorance of the role of women in the labour movement, various myths have arisen. One, of course, is that women have not attempted to organize in the past. Another, which was also prevalent in the earlier period, is that women are in fact unorganizable. This latter myth was in the past based simply on prejudice against women, but nowadays uses the erroneous historical myth as a rationale.

The trade union movement has both shared in and propagated these assumptions. Then and now a male-dominated movement, it has a ten-

¹ To test the truth of this assertion, see for example: Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater*; Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*; Charles Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada 1827-1959*; Stuart Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada 1906-1966*.

dency to view women as reactionary, materialistic and non-class-conscious. Their supposed non-participation in trade unionism is blamed on "false consciousness" and "femininity," and because of this, female workers, especially in white-collar occupations, tend to be ignored when unions conduct organizing drives. Thus the myth of unorganizability is perpetuated. For example, until very recently mainstream trade unions did not make any significant effort to organize bank workers, who are mostly female. It took a small, independent and feminist union in B.C., the Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada, to change this situation. They conducted a drive to organize these workers, received a good response, took their case to the Labour Relations Board, and won the right for bank workers to be unionized. As soon as SORWUC's success became apparent, the labour movement jumped on the bandwagon and allocated funds and a female organizer to start its own drive for a bank workers' union.

The labour movement in the early part of this century had much the same attitude towards women as the modern trade unionists. Women were often seen as a threat to male job security, and instead of the unions trying to organize them, the response to this "threat" was to admonish women to remain in the home. Also, the medical misconceptions of the day led people to believe, for example, that work in factories wasn't healthy for women specifically, rather than leading them to push for improved health and safety standards for all workers. These factors contributed to resolutions such as the following put forward by the Dominion Trades and Labor Council in their 1903 platform of principles. They called for "abolition of child labor by children under 14 years of age; and of female labor in all branches of industrial life, such as mines, workshops, factories, etc."²

Ten years later attitudes had not changed. At a meeting of the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council (VTLC) in 1913, a delegate from the Moulders' Union presented a motion that women not be employed in foundries, as "we consider such labor for women is physically, mentally and in every way detrimental to the sex and consequently to the race."³ This motion was endorsed by the Council.

By 1915, however, some change was made in official policy, at least. The annual convention of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada discussed amending the 1903 principle cited above to read: "Abolition

² *The Independent*, 29 August 1903.

³ *Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, General Meetings minute* (hereinafter *VTLCg*), 21 August 1913.

of child labour by children under sixteen years of age and the establishing of the principle of equal pay for equal work for men and women.”⁴ It is unclear if this amendment passed.

In looking at the history of women in the labour movement, it is interesting to note that there are some obvious parallels to the history of non-white workers. Overt discrimination was practised especially against Chinese, Japanese and East Indians by the society at large, and this was reflected in the union movement. The same kinds of myths grew up about these workers as grew up about female workers, that they were potential scabs rather than potential union comrades.

In every labour newspaper of the period, there are repeated calls for bans on immigration, boycotts of businesses owned by Asian people or businesses which employed them, and general racist comments, such as by the Press Agent for the Waiters and Waitresses Union, who termed Orientals “yellow objects.”⁵ Instead of trying to establish a feeling of solidarity with immigrant and female workers, the labour movement fell back on the rhetoric of “unorganizability,” and its solution to all of these low-wage workers was to send them back where they came from, either across the seas or to the kitchen. The outstanding exception appears to have been the Industrial Workers of the World, who interestingly enough advocated both the organization of Asiatics⁶ and the active participation of women (such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn) as leaders and members.

Both Japanese and native Indian workers attempted to organize at times during these years, but were subject to sabotage by the racist attitudes of the other workers. In 1893, for example, Japanese fishermen were asked to support a strike by the Fraser River Fishermen’s Protective and Benevolent Association, but were turned down when they wanted to join the Association. An offer of \$500 to the Association, to help them set up their own Japanese Fishermen’s union, was also rejected. In 1900 they did set up their own Japanese Fishermen’s Benevolent Society, with 1,250 members, which took a leading part in the strike of Fraser River Fishermen in 1900. Native Indians took part in this, as they had in the 1893 strike. Native Indians were also organizing in the lumber industry,

⁴ *Labour Gazette*, (hereinafter *LG*), Ottawa, Canada, Vol. XVI, October 1915, p. 405.

⁵ *Independent*, 3 January 1903.

⁶ A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement 1899-1919* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 102.

and formed the main part of the IWW Lumber Handlers' Union, around 1906.⁷

Nowadays, trade unions have changed their line on the unorganizability of non-white workers, and generally look back on this period of their history with shame. They acknowledge that their past attitudes and policies in this respect stemmed from prejudice.⁸ Strangely, though, they refuse by and large to see the parallels to their attitudes towards women workers.

Women, however, *did* organize, despite the lack of support from their union brothers. They joined male unions, formed their own locals, and even their own separate unions in many of the main occupations in which they were employed. In addition to this, they gave active support to men's union struggles, and organized campaigns to buy only union-made goods in what they called "Label" campaigns. Their organizations during this period were generally short-lived, but their failure seems to be due more to objective conditions such as economic depression, lack of labour movement support, lack of legislative protection and political power, than to what historian Wayne Roberts, criticizing recent historical studies, refers to as the "allegedly warped personality structure of their femininity."⁹

This article aims, through a compilation of primary source materials, to recover for the reader a general outline of Vancouver women's early trade union activities. Hopefully, with the presentation of factual data, it will be seen that, just as the history of non-white workers has been distorted by prejudice, so has the history of women workers.

At the turn of the century, women's place in the labour force was changing. While the majority of wage-earning female workers remained in such occupations as domestic service, positions such as sales clerk were becoming "women's work" and still others, such as telephone operators, used female labour more or less from their inception. Between 1891 and 1911, the percentage of working women in Canada engaged in domestic and personal service work dropped from 51.9 percent to 38.1 percent.

⁷ Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver: B.C. Federation of Labour and Boag Foundation, 1967), pp. 25, 35-37, and 46.

⁸ See, for example, Edward S. Seymour, *An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour 1800-1974* (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 1976), p. 10, where he calls a 1906 resolution to stop the immigration of Asiatics and East Indians "a tragic testimony in labour history by trade unionists."

⁹ Wayne Roberts, *Honest Womanhood: Feminism, Femininity, and Class Consciousness Among Toronto Working Women 1893 to 1914* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1976), p. 11.

The percentage of women in trade and merchandising rose from 4 percent to 11.6 percent, and the percentage of professional women rose from 10.2 percent in 1891 to 16.1 percent in 1901, and then dropped slightly to 15.9 percent in 1911. The percentage of women in manufacturing remained steady throughout these years, at around 25 to 27 percent of all women in the labour force.¹⁰

In 1911, women made up only 13.4 percent of the total workforce in Canada, and of these women 23.8 percent were immigrants.¹¹ The highest proportion of immigrant women were in domestic and personal service (55.2 percent), with manufacturing claiming almost 20 percent of the immigrant women. For women born in Canada the situation was different. Only 32.7 percent of them were in domestic and personal service, and 29.23 percent were in manufacturing.¹² The statistics for domestic service are easily explainable by the fact that many women were imported specifically to be domestic servants by organizations such as the Salvation Army.

One of the most interesting statistics is that of the ages of workers. In 1911 51.5 percent of female workers were under the age of 25. Approximately 49 percent of these were from 15 to 24 years old, and 2 percent were between 10 and 14 years old. Most of the female children under 15 in the workforce were in domestic and personal service (56 percent) or manufacturing (35.5 percent).¹³

Between 1891 and 1911, B.C.'s workforce underwent a significant change. The percentage of workers who were female went from 4.4 percent in 1891 to 5.86 percent in 1901, and had almost doubled the 1891 figure by 1911, when 8.07 percent of the workforce was female. These figures are much below the Canadian average, which went from 12.2 percent in 1891 to 13.39 percent in 1911. Alberta and Saskatchewan had even lower percentages of women workers in 1911 than did B.C. The Canada Census Report attributes these low rates to the pioneer nature of the western provinces at this time, and the fact that there were simply more men than women living there.¹⁴

In B.C. in 1911, the occupational distribution was somewhat different from the national averages, although the same general trends are shown.

¹⁰ *Census of Canada, 1911*, Vol. VI, Table 11, p. xx.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Table 13, p. xxi.

¹² *Ibid.*, Table 14, p. xxii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Tables 20 and 21, pp. xxvii, xxviii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Table 7, p. xvii.

Forty-two percent of B.C. working women were domestic and personal service workers, slightly higher than the national figure; manufacturing claimed 19.6 percent, lower than nationally; and professionals comprised 19.5 percent of the female workforce, higher than the national average.¹⁵

To narrow it down even further, in Vancouver women were 14.6 percent of the workforce, about one percentage point more than nationally. In actual numbers, this meant that in 1911 there were only 6,452 women (and 44,176 men) employed in the city of Vancouver. Of this number (6,452), the largest group were in domestic service (2,720 women), followed by 1,484 in the professions and 1,075 in trade and merchandising. Here, however, the census figures become clearer. Of "professional" women, 604 turn out to be stenographers and typists, 357 teachers (a very low-paid, low-status job at this time), and 242 nurses. In trade and merchandising 548 were saleswomen and 292 were office employees.¹⁶

In looking at these figures, Wayne Roberts' statement that working women before 1914 were "politically and socially isolated"¹⁷ takes on a new dimension. In Vancouver, at least, they were also numerically isolated. Not only were there very few of them, but the nature of their occupations meant that they were scattered and fragmented, in offices, stores and homes all over the city. Their hours of work were long, and they did not have access to the resources of middle- and upper-class women, such as club rooms and adequate, affordable transportation, not to mention childcare and servants.

Given all this, it is not hard to see the difficulties which women and girls faced in trying to unionize. That women did organize argues either a large degree of class-consciousness, or a large degree of desperation, or both. Union activity took place in many of the main occupations in which women were engaged. Only some of these occupations will be touched on here, and it must be emphasized that the accounts that will be given by no means pretend to be definitive.

One of the better known, if only recently, of the organizing efforts of women of this period is that of the female telephone operators. Employees of what was originally the New Westminster and Burrard Inlet Telephone Company, later B.C. Telephone Company, organized a Vancouver local, No. 213, of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Table 15, p. xxiii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Table VI, pp. 286-96.

¹⁷ Roberts, *Honest Womanhood*, pp. 10-11.

(IBEW), in October 1901. (The parent body had been formed in 1891.)¹⁸ They held two major strikes, one in 1902 and one in 1906.

On 26 November 1902 telephone operators, and male linemen, inspectors, trouble men and repairers all went out on strike for higher pay, shorter hours, and recognition of the union. The operators were asking for a wage increase of \$2.50 per month, and the male employees wanted increases of from \$5.00 to \$10.00 per month. Two days after the start of the strike, on November 28, New Westminster employees went out in sympathy, as did Victoria employees on November 29.¹⁹

The strike lasted until 12 December 1902.²⁰ The telephone company was forced to suspend service temporarily, and the general Vancouver business community went up in arms against the phone company, supporting the strikers and offering to send volunteers to run the service. The telephone company then, as now, was not a popular institution in the city, as they tended to behave as a law unto themselves, and of course had a monopoly on an essential (for businesses) service. One incident serves to illustrate this: in June of 1905 a B.C. Telephone superintendent and five workmen were arrested for destroying public property — they had been tearing up a city street, presumably to lay cables, without city permission.²¹

Either during or just after the strike, the telephone operators decided to form their own organization, a branch of the local called Auxiliary # 1 of Local 213. They had their own officers: Miss J. Hunter of 812 Homer St., president; Miss F. Livingstone, 660 Granville St., vice-president; Miss J. Browne, 827 Richards St., recording secretary; and Miss E. Bentley, 1121 Seymour Street, treasurer.²² A local labour newspaper reported of Auxiliary # 1 that they “control their own business, local 213 being represented by two delegates at their meetings.”²³

The Telephone Company appears to have given in to all of the strikers' demands. IBEW Local 213 was recognized, and the eight-hour day granted to the operators, although the company reserved the right to request that they work Sundays. A half-holiday every sixth Saturday was given, and three days per month sick leave. An immediate advance of \$2.50 per month was to be given every operator who had been six months

¹⁸ *Independent*, 5 September 1903.

¹⁹ *LG*, Vol. III, December 1902, pp. 477 and 479.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. III, January 1903, p. 566.

²¹ *Victoria Daily Times*, 23 June 1905 and 26 June 1905.

²² *Independent*, 31 January 1903. Directory of Unions.

²³ *Ibid.*, 31 January 1903.

in receipt of her present salary, and scheduled increases every six months after until the top limit was reached. For city operators this meant a ten-day probationary period at the start, then \$20 per month for the first six months, increasing to \$30 per month after two and a half years. For long distance operators and "assistant chiefs," \$32.50 per month was to be paid the first year and \$35.00 per month thereafter. In contrast the linemen were to receive a new starting salary of \$3 per day, approximately \$66 per month for a five and a half day work week, assistant foremen \$3.25 per day, and so on.²⁴

A month and a half after the conclusion of the strike the operators celebrated by getting together a committee of five women and five men to organize a dance at the O'Brien Hall, which was frequently used for various union social events. Eighty couples came and appeared to enjoy themselves; according to *The Independent*, "One of these affairs which go to make life worth the living was held Wednesday night in the O'Brien Hall. The telephone operators entertained themselves and their friends at dancing, games, luncheon, etc."²⁵

The gaiety had totally died down, however, by 1906. On February 22, the telephone operators struck to protest the company's refusal to hire only members of what the *Labour Gazette* called the "Telephone Operators Union," the auxiliary branch of Local 213. The next morning, all the IBEW members employed there also walked off the job. Thirty-four female operators and twenty male workers were involved. This time, though, there was no service interruption, as by a day after the start of the strike, the company had twenty-one operators working.

The operators said that the cause of the strike was

that the officers of their union had been discriminated against, and an attempt had been made by the management of the company to induce them to disband. It was on this account that the operators asked for recognition of their auxiliary, in the form in which the men's union was recognized.²⁶

The company claimed that their agreement to give hiring preference to IBEW members was made only with the men, and that the female operators had expressed no desire for such an agreement. They also said that on 9 January 1906 thirty-one out of thirty-seven operators had signed a declaration that they did not wish to belong to the union. Since then many had joined it (possibly out of indignation at being coerced to

²⁴ *LG*, Vol. III, January 1903, p. 517.

²⁵ *Independent*, 31 January 1903.

²⁶ *LG*, Vol. VI, March 1906, pp. 1030-31.

sign the declaration!) and had asked that only members of the union should be employed. The company said they could not grant this demand, as it would mean dismissing the other operators. They also used a technicality to claim that the men had broken their agreement by striking. Finally, the dispute was referred to the Vice-President of the International.²⁷

The strike dragged on for months, with claims and counter-claims being made by the company and the strikers. Finally, in May, B.C. Telephone broke off all negotiations. No settlement was made, and the places of all the strikers were filled.²⁸ Local 213 of the IBEW still exists in Vancouver today, but the power of the Telephone Operators Union appears to have been permanently broken by their defeat in this strike.

Various other unions had women among their membership, where women were a small or large part of the industry. One of these was the Retail Clerks International Protective Association, which was formed in August 1899 and chartered in January 1900. The Vancouver union was apparently the first of its kind in Canada. It tried to affiliate with the American National Association of Retail Clerks, which became the International so as to include "Canadian subordinates."²⁹

Female clerks are mentioned as active members as early as 1902, when they were reported as attending a meeting in Victoria. By mid-1903, the total membership was seventy-two and enlarging. They campaigned for shorter hours, closing on Sundays and legal holidays, and met with some success in getting stores that stayed open until 9 or 10 o'clock at night to close earlier. They also asked union members and the public to demand to see a clerk's union card, and if it could not be produced, not to buy from that clerk.³⁰

By late 1904 or 1905 the union had disbanded.³¹ In May 1913 re-organizing had started, with women and men joining together to form a union.³² In February 1914 the VTLC received a communication from the Retail Clerks Protective Association about organizing a local of the union in Vancouver.³³ In April 1913 it was reported that women clerks

²⁷ *Loc. cit.*

²⁸ *LG*, Vol. VI, April 1906, p. 1153, and June 1906, p. 1383.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5 September 1903.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 May 1902; 5 September 1903; 27 December 1902.

³¹ *B.C. Federationist*, 27 December 1912, p. 25.

³² *LG*, Vol. XIII, June 1913, p. 1380.

³³ *VTLCg*, 19 February 1914.

made from \$3 to \$25 per week, the average wage being \$10 per week. At the same time, the local Women's Council estimated that the bare minimum for survival for a woman was \$7.50 per week: \$5 for room and board (a very conservative estimate); \$.50 for carfare; \$.50 for laundry; \$1.50 for all clothing necessary. Girls of fourteen and under were employed by the stores at \$3 a week, working for at least two years before gradually rising to a living wage.³⁴

Other unions with female workers in them included the Bookbinders' and the Tailors' unions. The Bookbinders Union was established about 1901, as Local 105 of the International Bookbinders Union. In 1903 they are reported as having a full membership of "workmen," and no mention is made of female members at this time, although they could well have been there.³⁵ In Toronto, women had formed the Women's Bindery Union in 1901, and by 1902 had 350 members.³⁶ By 1913, there must have been a significant female membership in Local 105, as it is one of the few unions mentioned, in the monthly report of the Vancouver Women's Correspondent to the *Labour Gazette*, as having women members.³⁷ In 1914 the total membership of the union was thirty-one.³⁸

Data on tailoresses are somewhat more accessible, as prominent trade unionist and suffragist Helena Gutteridge was a member of the Tailors' Union. She represented the union as a delegate to the VTLC, became the recording secretary of the council, led the British Columbia Women's Suffrage Society, and later became a Vancouver alderwoman.³⁹ The Tailors' Union began in the early 1890s, but dissolved in the depression of 1893-5. In 1898 it was reorganized, with a Miss McRae serving as the treasurer.⁴⁰ She was still active in the union in late 1913, when she is mentioned as attending VTLC meetings to report on garment workers.⁴¹ Sometime during these years, the union became the United Garment Workers of America (UGWA).

³⁴ *LG*, Vol. XIII, April 1913, p. 1080.

³⁵ *Independent*, 5 September 1903.

³⁶ Roberts, *Honest Womanhood*, p. 23.

³⁷ *LG*, Vol. XIII, April 1913, p. 1079.

³⁸ *VTLCg*, 15 January 1914. Report by the delegate of the union named Mowatt, to the VTLC.

³⁹ Doreen Madge Weppeler, *Early Forms of Political Activity Among White Women in British Columbia 1880-1925* (Burnaby, B.C.: Simon Fraser University, unpublished M.A. Thesis, 1971), pp. 33 and 84, footnotes.

⁴⁰ *Independent*, 5 September 1903.

⁴¹ *VTLCg*, 16 October 1913 and 6 November 1913.

The 1911 census lists 86 tailoresses and 484 tailors in the city of Vancouver. There were also 388 dressmakers, all female, 7 male milliners, plus 26 female and 46 male "other clothing makers." These women workers appear to have been older than in many other trades — 424 of them were in the 25-65 years old bracket, and only 248 were under 25.⁴²

Although there were obviously women in the union from its 1898 inception, reports on the extent of early female participation could not be found for this study. In April 1913, however, it was reported that tailors were trying to organize tailoresses, despite "opposition" from the IWW.⁴³ In June of that year, tailoresses in conjunction with tailors decided to organize to get the forty-eight hour week, and in August there was a strike of twenty garment workers, ten men and ten women, in a joint effort to reduce the work week from fifty-four hours to forty-eight. It had been estimated that garment workers received from \$6 to \$15 a week on a nine-hour day basis.⁴⁴

The UGWA and the IWW appear to have had a jurisdictional dispute in B.C. as well as in other places in North America. In November 1913 Miss McRae brought to the attention of the VTLC meeting the fact that at Turner Beeton Company in Victoria an IWW label was being used. In March 1914 a warning was given at another meeting that the Turner Beeton Company label was "not that of a bona fide international union. It was known as a Pacific Coast union, using a yellow label, and was only a local organization." Later in the year the UGWA sent circulars to the VTLC explaining the dispute between them and the Industrial Tailors Union International (formerly Journeymen Tailors International). Apparently delegates from the latter union had been attending VTLC meetings.⁴⁵

The Shirt, Waist and Laundry Workers International Union established a local in Vancouver on 12 March 1902. Local 105 originally included among its officers three women: vice-president Mrs. Henderson, financial secretary Miss M. Whitmar, and treasurer Miss Jealous. A year and a half later, Miss Whitmar (or Whitmore) was listed as the vice-president, and the other women were no longer officers. A Miss Lomie had replaced Miss Jealous as the treasurer.⁴⁶

⁴² *Census of Canada, 1911*, Vol. VI, Table VI, pp. 288-89.

⁴³ *VTLCg*, 17 April 1913.

⁴⁴ *LG*, Vol. XIV, July 1913, p. 42, and September 1913, p. 266; Vol. XIII, April 1913, p. 1080.

⁴⁵ *VTLCg*, 6 November 1913; 5 March and 19 November 1914.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5 September and 7 November 1903.

Laundry Workers in Vancouver struck at least once or twice around 1902-1903, but the data on this are rather confusing, and the extent of women's participation not clear. One strike is reported to have occurred when the Excelsior Laundry declined to put work schedules into effect.⁴⁷ A benefit was given for striking laundry workers on 30 April 1903 in the form of a dance and social at O'Brien Hall.⁴⁸ The *Labour Gazette* mentions another strike on 12 June 1903 that lasted until June 29. It involved fifteen workers at two laundries who struck in a refusal to work with non-unionists, and was settled by arbitration. A slight increase in wages is the only reported outcome.⁴⁹

The SWLWIU established a local in Victoria as well, in November 1903.⁵⁰ On 19 June 1905 a strike was held by thirty employees, of whom twenty-two were girls and women, to recover back wages owed them. They were not paid as usual on Saturday night, and some of the women did not have enough money to last until Monday, so were given assistance by the other workers. One woman with three small children was evicted by her landlord, and the children's breakfast on Monday "came from the lunchpails of the striking laundrymen and laundrywomen."⁵¹

By the end of 1902, the Vancouver local had 70 members,⁵² but in 1904 the union sent a letter to the VTLC expressing their intention to withdraw delegates from the Council.⁵³ Sometime after this they disbanded. In early 1914 they reformed as Local 37 of the Laundry Workers and re-affiliated with the VTLC.⁵⁴ By April they had one place willing to sign up with them, and were working on two others. One business, Pioneer Laundry, responded by firing four or five employees who joined the union.

Over 700 women were said to be working in laundries in Vancouver in 1914, and women on heavy machines received only \$9 a week.⁵⁵ The report of the first female inspector for the Civic Health Department stated that the work in laundries was done standing, in buildings which were

⁴⁷ Wepler, *Political Activity*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁸ *B.C. Federationist*, 27 December 1912, p. 19.

⁴⁹ *LG*, Vol. IV, July 1903, p. 88.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, December 1903, pp. 591 and 679.

⁵¹ *Victoria Daily Times*, 19 June 1905, p. 4.

⁵² Wepler, *Political Activity*, p. 32.

⁵³ *VTLCg*, 18 November 1904.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 February 1914.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2 April 1914.

generally hot, and about three days of the week the women worked nine-hour days.⁵⁶

An early women's union to which only one reference was found was the Factory Workers Union, in existence in 1903. It was composed of women who worked in candy factories and confectionery shops, and had, according to *The Independent*, "a fair membership." The paper also reported that "J. B. Williams enjoys the proud distinction of being the only male member of this progressive union. And the girls [*sic*] have made him president."⁵⁷ In 1911 there were only thirty-one female workers in biscuit and confectionery making.⁵⁸ Figures could not be found for the earlier period.

One union in which women first formed part of the membership, and later launched their own autonomous local, was the union which incorporated hotel and restaurant employees. It was called, variously, Local 28 of the Waiters and Cooks Union, the Waiters and Waitresses, the Cooks, Waiters and Bartenders, and so on. The women's local suffered from the same confusion when established, being termed usually the Waitresses Union, but also the Waitresses and Lady Cooks Union, or the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, Local 766.

The original union started as a Knights of Labour local in 1898 or earlier.⁵⁹ Women were probably involved in it from the beginning. Waitresses are mentioned frequently in reports of the union's activities, and in 1903 at least one of the officers was female, a Miss A. Scuitto, the recording secretary.⁶⁰ The union was rabidly anti-Oriental, and one of its main concerns during this whole period was lobbying for restrictions on immigration, asking union members and the public not to patronize establishments owned by or employing Orientals, and trying to prevent white women from being employed by Orientals or even working alongside them.

This bias was present in the Waitresses Union as well, which was organized in June or July 1910, with thirteen women present at the meeting. They sent delegates to the VTLC regular meetings, and seem to have maintained an active presence there. An estimate at this time shows 300 women employed in hotels and restaurants in the city.⁶¹ This

⁵⁶ *LG*, Vol. XV, August 1914, pp. 189-90.

⁵⁷ *Independent*, 5 September 1903.

⁵⁸ *Census of Canada*, 1911, Vol. VI, Table VI, p. 288.

⁵⁹ Weppler, *Political Activity*, p. 35.

⁶⁰ *Independent*, 5 September 1903.

⁶¹ *Western Wage Earner*, July 1910, p. 11.

appears to have been fairly accurate, as in 1911 the census lists 232 female restaurant employees and 155 female hotel and boarding house employees.⁶²

By August 1910 five hotels and cafes employed union waitresses. Mrs. Rose Gardiner, who reported this fact to a VTLC meeting, also "discussed the proposition confronting the waitresses and the necessity of doing something to assist the girls in their battle to improve conditions."⁶³ In September an agreement for hotel and restaurant owners to sign was drawn up and sanctioned by the VTLC. It read:

We, the undersigned, do hereby agree to employ union waitresses and to apply to the secretary of the waitresses' union when there is a vacancy in my place . . . [to take effect] for a term of one year, from September 1, 1910. The waitresses' union, in consideration of the signature herein contained, do promise the support of the local unions and the central bodies in Vancouver to support houses displaying the card of the Waitresses Union, Local 766, Vancouver.⁶⁴

By October membership was increasing, but the demand by employers had outstripped the supply of union waitresses. Delegate Gardiner told the VTLC that the union was going to hold a dance at German Hall, on the corner of Robson and Granville, and a note of annoyance can be heard as she continued "that they would expect the delegates to the council and the members of organized labour generally to assist them as they had promised repeatedly to." At subsequent meetings she took the floor to make racist comments on Chinese cooks, and she specifically complained about one restaurant where the Chinese owner had a white wife who waited on the tables.⁶⁵

In 1913 the Women's Correspondent of the *Labour Gazette* reported that waitresses received \$10 per week for an eight-hour day, and \$12 per week for a ten-hour day with board. The Waitresses Union was still going strong and maintaining their close relationship with the mainstream trade union movement. Their headquarters was located in the Labour Temple,⁶⁶ and their delegate to the VTLC, Miss Polly Brisbane, was elected Statistician of that body, a position she held until her resignation in May 1914. In 1913, when Helena Gutteridge asked the VTLC to appoint a female

⁶² *Census of Canada, 1911*, Vol. VI, pp. 286-88.

⁶³ *VTLCg*, 18 August 1910.

⁶⁴ *LG*, Vol. XI, October 1910, p. 421.

⁶⁵ *VTLCg*, 6 October 1910; 3 November 1910; 17 November 1910.

⁶⁶ *LG*, Vol. XIII, April 1913, pp. 1079-80.

delegate to appear before the Minister of Labour (along with delegates from women's societies), Polly Brisbane was chosen, and accepted.⁶⁷

In January 1914 Miss Brisbane reported the membership of her union as thirty-five, with two members being unemployed. But in June of that year her report to the VTLC was that the charter of the Waitresses Union had been sent back. The waitresses were merging back with the men, into one union. Miss Brisbane continued to attend meetings as a delegate for a while, and filled in as Statistician occasionally, but eventually dropped out of sight.⁶⁸

Possibly the most interesting union of the period was the Home and Domestic Employees Union of British Columbia. This organization was made up entirely of women and was not connected with any male union. The aims and policies of the union were expressly radical and feminist, and the president of the HDEU wrote shortly after its formation that "[the HDEU] bids fair to be one of the most important organizations of women ever formed."⁶⁹

The HDEU was started on 19 March 1913 at a meeting at the Labor Temple to which about thirty-five women came. They were governesses, housemaids, nursemaids, cooks and other domestic workers. Their aims were ambitious. Aside from the three main objectives of the union — the nine-hour day, a minimum wage, and recognition as a body of industrial workers — they hoped eventually to establish a union hiring hall where employers would directly contract workers, to keep records on every place where members had worked or were at present employed, and to someday lease a building for a co-operative rooming house where they could live in healthy surroundings and enjoy a social life.⁷⁰

Within a month they had fifty members,⁷¹ and by August 1913 there were sixty-five women in the union.⁷² At this point they applied for affiliation with the VTLC, and were accepted. Two delegates were sent to the VTLC meetings, a Miss K. McCall and a Miss M. E. Priest. Later a Miss A. M. Evans and the president of the union, Lillian L. M. Coote, also attended these meetings.⁷³ Applications for membership were to be

⁶⁷ *VTLCg*, 21 May 1914; 3 July 1913.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15 January 1914; 4 June 1914, and various dates to end of 1914.

⁶⁹ *B.C. Federationist*, 28 March 1913, p. 3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 28 March 1913, pp. 1 and 4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18 April 1913, p. 1.

⁷² *LG*, Vol. XIV, August 1913, p. 152.

⁷³ *VTLCg*, 7 August and 21 August 1913; 6 November 1913; 8 January 1914.

sent to the union secretary, Miss E. Plaister, at 1537 Fifth Avenue East. Their office was in the Labor Temple, where the reading room had been divided in half and rented to them.⁷⁴

Like the Waitresses Union, and possibly despite their belief in industrial unionism, they appear to have had a close relationship with the main labour movement. At one VTLC meeting, Miss Evans "requested the delegates to do all they could to make known the objects of her organization, and asked union men to urge women to join." Miss Evans also joined an organizing committee, together with Miss Coote, Helena Guttridge and a male business agent, to look into organizing laundry workers in December 1913.⁷⁵ In January 1914, the B.C. Federation of Labour held its Fourth Annual Convention, and resolutions passed included one "Endorsing the Domestic Employees Union, pledging hearty co-operation and demanding that any eight-hour law enacted shall include domestic employees in its scope."⁷⁶

The union was sensitive to the problems of organizing women in domestic service. The long hours worked and the tiring nature of the work meant that it was difficult for women to attend meetings or even to go to the office to register. To deal with this, the HDEU planned to establish what they called a "walking bureau,"⁷⁷ presumably to go house-to-house as had been done earlier by a woman in Toronto.⁷⁸ They also dealt with the fear that single women might get married and leave the union by pointing out that many married women continued to do domestic work in the daytime, and left their children at the city creche. When this question arose at their first meeting, the reply was that "no woman of the working classes who gets married need be afraid that she may have to leave the union because she is not out working. And anyhow, does a woman work less hours, or get more wages, when she gets married than she did before? Well then."⁷⁹

The HDEU rejected the low status of their work, and the idea that they were "service" workers. They saw themselves, according to Miss Coote, as industrial workers under the capitalist system. Their Membership Creed, a copy of which was framed to hang on the wall of their

⁷⁴ *B.C. Federationist*, 28 March 1913, p. 4; *VTLC*, Board of Directors, meetings minutes, 11 July 1913.

⁷⁵ *VTLCg*, 20 November and 18 December 1913.

⁷⁶ *LG*, Vol. XIV, February 1914, p. 954.

⁷⁷ *B.C. Federationist*, 18 April 1913, p. 1.

⁷⁸ Roberts, *Honest Womanhood*, p. 15.

⁷⁹ *B.C. Federationist*, 28 March 1913, p. 4.

club room in the Labor Temple, stated: "Believing that the home has a greater influence on the community than the community has on the home, we pledge ourselves as members of the union, to do all in our power to dignify the labour pertaining thereto."⁸⁰

President Lillian Coote wrote a series of articles for the *B.C. Federationist* on the theories of the union and their goals. These form some of the only documents written by the women workers themselves that exist from this period, and in them she dealt with a variety of topics.

On working conditions for domestic employees, she stated that fourteen-hour days were common, and that even when not working, the women were almost totally at the disposal of their employers. Although the women came from differing social stations, their position in society was "a relic of feudalism."⁸¹

Upper- and middle-class women came in for some heavy criticism. On the same day that the HDEU was formed, 200 club women sold a women's edition of a daily paper on Vancouver streets, to raise money for a Women's Building. Miss Coote commented sarcastically that "they were filled with enthusiasm at what they appeared to think was their own original idea, namely the *awakening of women to the power of combination*" (her emphasis).⁸² In a later article she went on to say:

One cannot help wondering whether the many philanthropically inclined women of this province have seen fit to practically ignore the domestic problem question owing to the fact that the remedy would affect them — that they... fall short when it is a problem of touching their own pockets....⁸³

But she also understood the nature of these women's position and the nature of women's work:

Work must be clearly defined. Some women call afternoon teas, entertaining their husbands' friends, dressing to pay calls, etc., work and to a certain extent they are justified, because their object is mental and social advancement, which cannot be obtained without work of some sort or other. But after all, they have a free will in regard to their affairs, and if in the pursuit of their own advancement they work, it is they who reap the benefits of so doing.

There is another class of women, namely, the wives of working men... Their husbands take it for granted that their wives work because they like

⁸⁰ *LG*, Vol. XIV, September 1913, p. 266.

⁸¹ *B.C. Federationist*, 28 March 1913, p. 3.

⁸² *Loc. cit.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11 April 1913, p. 2.

it. Some men are foolish enough to say that it is not really work — it is just “keeping at it.” These women, however, do not need our sympathy — the remedy is in their own hands.⁸⁴

Lillian Coote was certainly not a revolutionary, although she talked about the employees’ “relationship with labor and capital,”⁸⁵ and the “degradation of a system which bartered for practically the ownership of an individual.” She, and the union, hoped to force legislation to be enacted to carry out their main objects. To this end, they determined to hold public meetings once a month “to show to the public the necessity of what they are asking.”⁸⁶ In 1914, a bill was introduced in the provincial legislature, an “Act Relating to the Employment of Domestic Employees.” It contained provisions for a nine-hour day and a fifty-four-hour week; it would have ended wage deductions for breakage of goods; and it stated that “wages” should mean lawful money of Canada, and should not include recompense by way of room and/or board. It did not get past committee.⁸⁷

At the time of the union’s formation in 1913, it was reported that the average wage for domestics was \$30 per month with room and board. By the end of 1915 this had fallen to from \$10 to \$15 per month.⁸⁸ Vancouver was in a deep depression and unemployment was extremely high. Women who lost their jobs in other trades turned to domestic service in large numbers, which further contributed to the lowering of wages. Skilled domestic workers apparently were continually leaving the city, some to go south, in search of better wages and conditions. In 1915, the Home and Domestic Employees Union, faced with such heavy odds against them, appears to have dissolved.⁸⁹

By now it should have become clear that, far from showing a “lack of interest in her economic future . . . [and] lack of interest in trade unions,”⁹⁰ women attempted to organize persistently in most of the major occupations they were engaged in, during the 1900-1915 period. Although the forms of this organization varied, and women were not necessarily inter-

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 4 April 1913, p. 2.

⁸⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 28 March 1913, p. 3; 18 April 1913, p. 1.

⁸⁷ *LG*, Vol. XIV, April 1914, p. 1163.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. XIII, April 1913, p. 1079; Vol. XVI, November 1915, pp. 569-70.

⁸⁹ Genevieve Leslie, “Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920,” in *Women at Work: Ontario 1850-1930* (Toronto: Canadian Women’s Educational Press, 1974), p. 123.

⁹⁰ *LG*, Vol. XIII, April 1913, p. 1079.

ested in forming their own autonomous or semi-autonomous unions, their belief in trade unionism was clearly demonstrated.

Since statistics on the make-up of union membership, in unions composed of both men and women, probably do not exist, it is even possible that unions thought of as mostly male may have been largely female in composition. Though the leadership of these unions tended to be largely male, this does not necessarily reflect the proportions of the membership. In turn, the male domination of leadership positions does not mean that women were not interested in or did not have a permanent commitment to trade unions. Many other factors could have been responsible for the largely male leadership, not the least of which would have been children, for married women, and the burden of housework for all women, cares which would have reduced to almost nothing the time available to them for attending meetings and conventions. Another factor was probably the negative attitudes of many male unionists towards women working for wages at all, let alone their holding leadership positions in trade unions.

The problem remains of how many women participated in these unions; in other words, were they only a small percentage of working women and, if so, why? The first question may be unanswerable, although further enquiry may turn up more data. At this point, though, it appears that their numbers were indeed small in relation to the total female working population.

This leaves the second question, of why this was so. When the nature of women's work and of their lives at this period in time is looked at, it is not justifiable to assume simply that their own psychology was to blame. Undoubtedly psychology had something to do with it — most women at this time probably assumed that they would at some point marry; and given the kind of work available to women — work performed for long hours, under oppressive and unhealthy conditions, at incredibly low wages, they also probably hoped not to have to work outside their homes as well as in them. Given this hope of temporary status as a worker, and the economic marginality of many women's survival (and therefore the need to cling to what jobs they had), some women would not have been willing to risk joining or starting a union in an age where no protective legislation existed ensuring union rights.

The objective difficulties surrounding unionization must have been enormous for them, in any case. Most women were separated from each other both at their workplace and when they returned home; they lacked places to meet each other where they could realize their common problems; and they did not have media avenues wherein to discuss their

grievances. Their long hours of work, combined with the housework they returned to, meant not only that it would have been hard to find time to meet, but also indicates that many women must have spent their lives in a state of mental and physical exhaustion. Lillian Coote stated one of the objectives of the Home and Domestic Employees Union to be "help other women to realize that there is something more in life than work and sleep."⁹¹

The fact that the unions formed did not last for long can be partly attributed to just such difficulties. The lack of permanent and measurable improvements in wages and working conditions, due to employer intransigence and the anti-union policies of government, must also have been a discouraging factor. In the later years from 1911 on, and especially from 1913 to 1915, Vancouver, in common with the rest of the country, was suffering from a severe economic depression. Under these conditions, resulting in an employer's labour market, the situation for trade unions and workers in general was hardly favourable.

In sum, it seems rather amazing that women were able to organize at all. But organize they did, despite the overwhelming odds against them, and in large enough numbers to justify re-evaluating their place in the history books.

⁹¹ *B.C. Federationist*, 11 April 1913, p. 2.