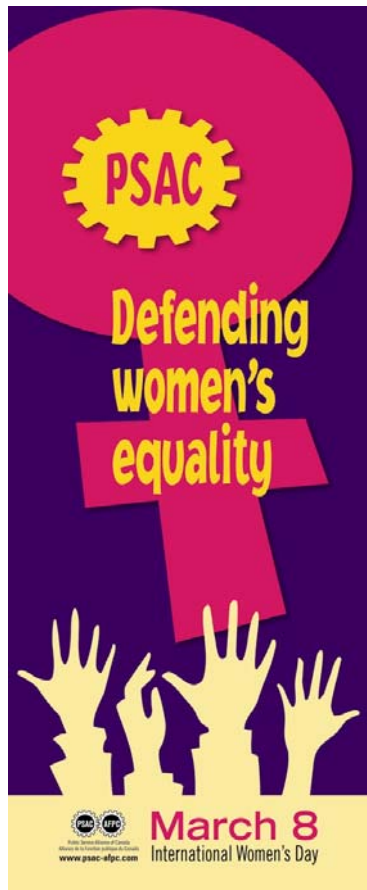


The Harper Record: Sexist and Inequitable Governance



The Conservative government has been systematically chipping away at women's rights since taking power in 2006. In the budget it tabled last January, the government took aim specifically at pay equity for women employed in the federal public service. On the occasion of International Women's Day, PSAC is denouncing the sexist and discriminatory policies of the Harper government.

Cancellation of child care funding

Since the Harper government has been in power, there has been no political will to support a pan-Canadian network of child care and early learning initiatives. In the spring of 2006, the Harper government cancelled the bilateral agreements to fund child care that the Liberals had negotiated with the provinces, and replaced them with a "universal" taxable benefit of \$1,200 a year. After taxes, this amount is barely enough to cover the costs of an occasional babysitter.

In December 2008, a UNICEF report card on early childhood education and child care ranked Canada last among 25 developed nations. UNICEF observed that early childhood education and child care has huge potential to enhance children's well-being and development with

significant long-term social and economic returns.

As families experience job losses in a deepening recession, access to child care is even more important. Good child care allows female single parents – many of whom are poor and unlikely to be able to afford user fees for child care of any kind – to seek further education, train for work, get decent jobs and accept job promotions.

The incidence of single mothers living below the poverty line in Quebec dropped substantially as universal access to regulated child care increased from 1997 to the present. Child care also helps families with two working parents to improve their economic stability and income at a time of insecure employment and stagnating wages.

In addition, child care helps the economy because it creates jobs and frees up parents to be able to work. This leads to higher government tax revenues and enhanced local economic activity, reducing poverty and lowering social program costs in the process¹.

¹ Martha Friendly and Laurel Rothman, *Budget memo on child care: Canada can't work without it; The economic downturn makes investment in children and families more important than ever. Are you listening, Mr. Flaherty?* The Toronto Star, January 8, 2009.

While there was a very large consensus that the 2009 federal budget should provide a substantial amount of money for child care, the January 27 budget rang silent on child care.

Attacks women's rights

In the fall of 2006, the federal government announced major cuts to Status of Women Canada, closing of 12 out of 16 regional offices and changing the eligibility requirements for women's groups seeking funding. Women's organizations are now banned from engaging in advocacy or feminist research if they want to secure Status of Women funding.

This struck a severe blow to the women's movement and reduced its ability to promote legislative reforms and policies to achieve women's equality. It forced women's organizations to lay off staff and led to the closure of the National Association of Women and the Law, a key player on the pan-Canadian scene since 1974.

Also in 2006, the Conservative government scrapped funding for the Court Challenges Program, which for many years had provided financial support for women and other groups to bring equality cases to court. In doing so, Harper effectively undercut women's ability to challenge discriminatory laws using article 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Not only did the government undermine the ability of women's groups to analyze federal policies and recommend egalitarian reforms, but it denied women the opportunity to turn to the courts to seek justice.

Attacks on the reproductive rights of women

Last spring, the majority of Conservative MPs backed a Private Member's Bill that would have established legal "personhood" for fetuses and threatened a woman's right to a legal abortion in the process. Bill C-484 purported to protect women by making it a separate crime to injure an "unborn child," but would have compromised the rights of pregnant women in the process. Thankfully, the bill died on the order paper after the 2008 election was called.

This type of legislation is popular among anti-choice activists in the U.S., where it has been used to criminalize women and intimidate doctors who practice abortions. Even though it was a private member's bill, C-484 received virtually unanimous support from the Conservatives, including Prime Minister Harper. Members of the Conservative party passed a resolution supporting this type of legislation at their annual convention a few weeks ago. Although the Justice Minister withdrew his support for Bill C-484 shortly before the 2008 election, it is anticipated that one of the MPs in the Conservative "pro-life caucus" will once again lead the charge and table another private member's bill in the months ahead.

Budget policies that work against women

When the Conservatives were elected in 2006, they immediately reduced the GST and cut corporate taxes. This seriously weakened the Canadian government's ability to fund social and economic programs. While hundreds of thousands of women live in the most abject poverty, the government has adopted measures in the past few years which benefit the wealthiest members of society. Who really benefits from cuts to the GST, aside from men (and a few women) who can afford a \$50,000 car or a \$100,000 yacht?

The 2009 budget tabled in February doesn't recognize women's contributions to our country's economy in any way, shape or form. It does not create jobs for women or support social programs for women in need.

This budget set aside \$16 billion to cover infrastructure projects, a sector where only small minority of women work. But there is no mechanism in place to ensure that contractors train and hire women to work on these work sites. In addition, the budget did not provide any money for "social" infrastructure projects such as the development of a universal child care system, an increase in social assistance or the delivery of health care.

What's worse is that the budget's changes to the Employment Insurance (EI) system will not benefit most working women. Indeed, less than 33 per cent of unemployed women qualify for EI, because of the high number of hours of work that are required in order to make a claim. These rules exclude most part-time and atypical workers.

There is a broad consensus in favour of lowering the number of hours of work required to be eligible for EI to 360, no matter where people live. Instead, the government opted to extend the benefit period from 45 to 50 weeks.

This will be of no benefit to the women who are not eligible for EI under the current rules, even though these women have paid EI premiums for most of their working lives.

And even when women do manage to work a sufficient number of hours to qualify for EI, they often earn so little that they can't actually make ends meet on EI benefits: in reality, 55 per cent of minimum wage is simply not enough to feed the kids and pay the rent.

A budget that does not address the needs of women who are Aboriginal, racialized or have disabilities

The 2009 budget was a golden opportunity to make some badly needed infrastructure improvements to First Nations communities and create local jobs in the process, but once again the Harper government fell far short. While the budget does provide \$1.4 billion in Aboriginal-specific investment, it doesn't come close to either fulfilling the pledge outlined in the Kelowna Accord or meeting the demand for education funding, clean water, health care or housing.

The funds provided for in the budget to recognize foreign credentials are little more than window dressing and are unlikely to help immigrants access jobs or combat racism. The Federal Credentials Referral Office is just that, a referral office. It does not provide recognition of foreign credentials. The money put in place for this program is earmarked for the federal government to negotiate with provincial governments to get common standards of recognition in place. While this is a first step, it does nothing to address the needs of millions of immigrants who are currently unemployed or under-employed in Canada.

This budget completely ignores persons with disabilities, save for a small investment in subsidized housing. The Harper government has ignored calls for a national strategy on disability. What's needed are investments in disability related supports, initiatives to alleviate poverty among people with disabilities, supports to increase labour force participation and new initiatives to promote access, inclusion and full citizenship of all persons with disabilities.

Attacks on pay equity

In the fall of 2006, the Harper government formally refused to table federal pay equity legislation, saying it believed that section 11 of the *Canadian Human Rights Act* was sufficient – even though workers and women's rights advocates had spent many years pointing out the flaws in the system.

In 2004, after three years of research, consultations and analysis, the Task Force on Pay Equity ruled that the current complaints-based system was ineffective. It recommended that the government introduce proactive pay equity legislation, similar to what exists in Quebec and Ontario, which would apply to workers under federal jurisdiction.

In November 2008, the UN criticized the Canadian government for failing to meet its commitments under the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*.

In a stunning about-face, the Harper government introduced a bill as part of the 2009 budget that supposedly “modernizes” pay equity for women employed in the federal public service. In fact, the new law restricts the scope of pay equity so that fewer women are entitled to it. These new “equitable compensation” rules will relegate pay equity to the bargaining table and take it out of the human rights domain.

As a result, women in the public service will no longer be able to take their case to the Human Rights Commission when they feel that they are not being given equal pay for work of equal value. What's worse is that unions are prohibited from helping their members make complaints, under threat of a \$50,000 fine.

Pay equity is a fundamental human right and it should not be negotiable. When all is said and done, the employer always has control over working conditions and salaries. In the federal system, Treasury Board has been putting off a review of its classification

systems for more than a decade, which ultimately determines how women will be compensated. The notion that equality could be guaranteed through negotiations where the employer holds the balance of power is just absurd.

PSAC is fighting hard against the *Public Service Equitable Compensation Act*, demanding that Parliament remove it from the budget bill. Government officials have admitted that there was no proof that the new pay equity rules would save the government any money. But the Harper Conservatives are insisting on shoving the law into the omnibus budget bill, making it a matter of confidence on which the government could fall.

The NDP and the Bloc Québécois are attempting to remove the pay equity bill from the *Budget Implementation Act*. PSAC members across Canada are putting pressure on the Liberals to support the initiative, urging them not to sell out pay equity for women in the federal public sector.

PSAC will continue to fight against this regressive law and insist that the federal government follow the 2004 recommendations of the Pay Equity Task Force. Canadian women deserve a pay equity regime that is truly proactive and will ensure equal pay for work of equal value. The fight is not over.

Conclusion

The Harper government has displayed shameful prejudice against working women, disrespecting all women's rights in the process.

On this International Women's Day, we demand that the federal government:

- Respect women's rights by guaranteeing equal benefits and equal protection to all women.
- Review its budget policies so that women can actually receive their fair share of public funding and benefit equally from stimulus spending.
- Provide adequate funding for a universal public child care system.
- Scrap the *Public Service Equitable Compensation Act* and implement the recommendations of the Pay Equity Task Force.