

Spotlight on International Women's Day The struggle continues

Women still fighting for equality and human rights

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the first international women's conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, which led to the creation of International Women's Day. The day had been celebrated in many countries since the mid-1800s. But in 1910, women made the day a part of a worldwide movement and haven't looked back since.

March 8 also represents the 40 year anniversary of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women – the first Canada-wide investigation into women's equality, which made recommendations that women are still fighting for today.

Canadian women have seen many victories over the last four decades, including constitutional rights under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, paid maternity leave and laws that ensure equal pay for work of equal value. In addition, Canadian women played a significant role in ensuring that women's rights and gender equality are included in international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

But even though women have seen many improvements over the last 40 years, there is still much work to be done. Since the election of Stephen Harper's Conservative government in 2006, women have seen their rights rolled back or denied.

Harper recently hired Darrel Reid as his Deputy Chief of Staff. Reid is the former president of Focus on the Family Canada, an evangelical organization that campaigns against homosexuality, abortion, child care and divorce. So it's no coincidence that the Harper government has followed a blueprint designed by the extreme right-wing, undercutting years of labour union and feminist activism.



Child care agreements cancelled

One of Stephen Harper's first actions as Prime Minister was to cancel the funding agreements for child care that had been negotiated with most provinces and territories in 2005. Instead, he introduced a so-called "Universal Child Care Benefit,"

which only provides a taxable \$100 a month for each child less than six years of age. This doesn't come close to covering the real cost of child care and does nothing to create desperately-needed new spaces.

PSAC wanted to better understand the impact of Harper's child care policies on our members, so we convened regional forums all over the country to hear from the women in our union.

Participants expressed frustration about the lack of affordable child care spaces for families with very young children. They explained that many of them have been placed on waiting lists for years. They told us that child care services are often only available during the day, which excludes women working evening or irregular hours. Many of them have been forced to patch together a network of informal caregivers,

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Pay equity attacked



PSAC women activists gathered in regional forums all over Canada and Quebec during the fall and winter.

In the 2009 budget, the Harper government undercut pay equity for women working in the federal public sector. In doing so, the Conservatives signaled their disdain for women – eliminating public sector workers’ ability to earn equal pay for work of equal value.

The 2009 *Public Sector Equitable Compensation Act* restricts the scope of pay equity in the federal public sector, ensuring that fewer women are entitled to it. The new “equitable compensation” rules relegate pay equity to the bargaining table and take it out of the human rights domain.

As a result, women in the public service are no longer allowed to take their cases to the Human Rights Commission when 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.

In 2004, after three years of research, consultations and analysis, the Task Force on Pay Equity 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. The Harper government chose to ignore

the task force’s recommendation and decided instead to undermine women’s equality.

PSAC has launched several initiatives to challenge the Harper government on this issue. We have initiated legal procedures to challenge the government’s discriminatory and unfair legislation in court. We have also filed a “communication” with the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women to denounce the federal government. This is in addition to lobbying and grassroots activism initiated by PSAC activists and elected officials.

These efforts have resulted in small victories. This fall, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff tabled a private member’s bill (Bill C-471) that would repeal the *PSECA* and replace it with proactive pay equity legislation based on the task force’s recommendations.

Despite the fact that Parliament has been prorogued, this bill will survive when MPs resume their work this spring. But we still have a long way to go before the bill becomes law – if it receives the support of the other opposition parties.

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.

Child care still a challenge

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including grandparents and unlicensed babysitters.

Canadian women have been calling for a comprehensive publicly-funded and delivered child care system since the 1970s. As families experience job losses in this difficult economic environment, 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.

Today’s numbers say it all: 66 per cent of women with children under three work outside the home, while 75 per cent of women with children between the ages of three and five are part of the paid workforce. But outside of Quebec, less than 20 per cent of children have access to regulated child care spaces. This widening gap between the real need for child care and the lack of available services is due to the government’s failure to invest in a national child care strategy.

Funding to women's groups cut

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*.



In 2008, PSAC women were at the forefront of the fight against Bill C-484, which would have threatened women's right to choose.

PSAC has demonstrated its commitment to women's equality by providing \$90,000 in funding to six women's groups that have faced serious financial shortages since the Conservative government took power in 2006.

On February 1, PSAC renewed its financial commitment to the Feminist Alliance for International

Action, the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, the Fédération des femmes du Québec, the National Association of Women and the Law, the Canadian Institute for the Advancement of Women and the Ad Hoc Coalition for Women's Equality. Each organization will receive \$15,000.

Once again, PSAC is taking a strong stand in solidarity with organizations that have been hard hit by the Conservatives' policy banning all federal funding for research and advocacy on women's rights. At a recent meeting of the G8, Harper proclaimed a commitment to fight maternal mortality, yet he has done little at home to actually help women.

The Harper government has relentlessly attacked women's rights at home. Our union is proud to stand in solidarity with groups that are promoting justice and equality for women both in Canada and around the world.



National Vice-President Patty Ducharme (second from right) joined PSAC activists at the Vancouver Regional Women's Forum in November.

Gun registry under fire

It seems bitterly ironic that Parliament voted on a bill to eliminate the gun registry, just as PSAC activists were in the midst of commemorating the 20th anniversary of the massacre at École Polytechnique.

Bill C-391, a private member's bill sponsored by Conservative MP Candice Hoepfner, is the latest in the long history of right-wing attempts to eliminate Canada's gun registry. Under fire is the system for registering rifles and shotguns and its accompanying database of roughly eight million firearms records. If the bill succeeds, it would allow long guns to be unaccounted for and completely untraceable.

The Canadian Firearms Registry allows police to check households for the presence of firearms before responding to a dispute. It is used roughly 10,000 times each day. The service is essential in cases of domestic violence, where the presence of a gun in the home can radically

increase the risk of harm to women and children. Since the registry was established in 1995, gun related spousal homicides in Canada have been reduced by 50 per cent.

Despite the prorogation of Parliament, the threat of Bill C-391 is as present as ever. On November 4, 2009, the bill passed second reading by 27 votes and was referred to the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security. It was supported by the entire Conservative caucus, along with a handful of NDP and Liberal MPs. Prorogation does not affect the progress of private members' bills, meaning that Bill C-391 will be discussed in committee as planned when Parliament resumes in March.

PSAC activists – particularly in the Atlantic region and in Quebec – are fighting hard to defend the gun registry and prevent the passage of Hoepfner's bill. As the Canadian Labour Congress' postcard campaign emphasized, December 6 marked the 20th

anniversary of the murder of 14 young women in Montreal. But remembrance is not enough. We must act now to save an important tool that keeps our communities safe from gun violence.

Visit psac.com to sign a petition in support of the gun registry.



PSAC women in Quebec and in the Atlantic are leading the struggle to save the long gun registry.

Still marching for women's equality

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women will



be meeting in New York this month. It will be reviewing how Canada and other countries around

the world have implemented the commitments they made at the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995.

PSAC will be in New York to let the world know how Canada has betrayed its promise to the women of this country. We will be working in solidarity with women's groups and labour activists

from all over the world, to push for greater respect of women's equality rights.

Here's how you can help:

- Tell your friends, family and neighbours about Harper's attacks on women's rights.
- Work with your Regional Women's Committee to help raise these issues in your workplace and community.
- Write and ask to meet with your MP.
- Write to your local paper and participate in call-in radio shows.
- When a federal election is called, challenge election candidates to address these issues.

Visit psac.com to join the struggle for women's equality and human rights.

