

THE RISING OF THE WOMEN IS THE RISING OF US ALL

THURSDAY, MARCH 6, 2008

March 8th marks the 100-year anniversary of the event that gave birth to International Women's Day. On that day in 1908, 15,000 women, many first-generation immigrant women, marched through the streets of Manhattan, demanding the right to vote, but also their rights as working women – shorter hours, better pay, and the right to join a union. They also marched to honour their sisters in the needle trades, who 51 years earlier, on March 8, 1857, marched and picketed, demanding improved working conditions, a 10- hour day, and equal rights for women.

In 1910, an international conference of socialist women adopted March 8th as the specific date to mark the occasion each year. The date was proposed by the German socialist Clara Zetkin, a member of the Bookbinder's Union who helped bring German women into predominantly male unions. She took the idea of Women's Day and the date of March 8th from the inspiring event in New York City.

In the years that followed, working women led a strike wave around the world. Many of these strikes were groundbreaking victories, but they were also bitter and violent, and the times were marked by hardship and tragedy. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City in 1911, where 146 women lost their lives because exits were locked, was a bitter reminder of what was at stake for working women.

Some of the most important labour organizers of the day were women. They led both women and men in the workers' movement and became legends of American labour history. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn helped lead the Lawrence, Massachusetts textile strike of 1912. The women in Lawrence struck when their wages were cut in response to a new state law. They went from mill to mill urging their fellow workers to join them, and 20,000 women and men, speaking 25 different languages, walked off the job.

This strike was the inspiration for the song "Bread and Roses" which became the anthem of the North American women's movement in the 1960s, and is still sung on International Women's Day. One of its lines, "The Rising of the Women is the Rising of us all", is the slogan of this year's celebration of IWD in Toronto. The slogan "We fight for bread, but we fight for roses too" originated on picket signs carried by women in Lawrence in 1912.

This is the fighting spirit that International Women's Day commemorates. Today, 100 years later, we witness this same spirit in mass organizing campaigns such as Hotel Workers Rising, Justice for Janitors and others where unions continue to fight to raise the standards for women and all workers. Having unions and the right to unionize is just as vital today as it was a century ago.

The Executive Board recommends that:

1. All affiliates help educate their members on IWD and its roots in labour organizing, and mobilize for turnout at the March 8th IWD event;
2. Labour Council and affiliates build strong alliances with newcomer communities and women activists to highlight the need for unionization in our mutual struggle for social justice.
3. Labour Council congratulate the Recipient of the 2008 Woman of Labour Award, Sister Anabel Dalmao of CAW Local 112.