"NOT ANOTHER GOD-DAMNED HOUSEWIFE": RUTH BULLOCK, THE "WOMAN QUESTION" AND CANADIAN TROTSKYISM

by

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in the Department of History

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"NOT ANOTHER GOD-DAMNED HOUSEWIFE": Ruth Bullock, the "Woman Question" and Canadian Trotskyism

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the intersection of socialism and women's rights politics in Canada by focusing on the life of Ruth Bullock, a working-class housewife who was active in the Trotskyist Movement during the 1940s and 1950s. The thesis employs the method of oral history through extensive interviews with Bullock, however the majority of the primary written sources were found in the Bullock Collection in the Special Collections of the University of British Columbia library.

Ruth Bullock's political strategy, the thesis argues, was to employ “doubled vision”. That is, she worked in partisan structures such as the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation and later combined this with an allegiance to the Trotskyist revolutionary movement. At the same time, she made independent connections within grass-roots community networks to provide contraceptive and abortion information to working-class women. The thesis also assesses the role of women in a general way within the Trotskyist movement. The party confronted the “women question” but like other leftist formation, the Trotskyists failed to find an answer. On a practical level, both their external political work and policy development, as well as their internal mechanisms to promote women’s interests and address women's particular concerns, left much to be desired. However, women seeking political education and an active role in policy formation and decision-making were relatively well served by the political dynamics of a very small Marxist party.

Thus the thesis explains that partisan political choices, such as sustaining activity in the CCF and the Trotskyist movement, could strengthen a working-class woman like Ruth Bullock during a period of a general dearth of feminist political organizing in Canada. The study also suggest that Bullock's strategy of combining partisan activity with independent grass-roots action may not have been uncommon. She found the means to address her concerns for women, and this route fell largely outside party structures.
This thesis is dedicated to my father Donald Kenneth McLeod, who valued education, especially history, and to Elizabeth Lees for whom the struggle to gain an education resulted in personal empowerment.
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Many people have assisted in the completion of this thesis. My family have consistently offered love and assistance. My mother, Marjorie McLeod provided moral support and hospitality as did Christine and Kirk McLeod, and Don, Ian, and Jenny Gibson.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIO .................. Committee for Industrial Organization
CPC .................. Communist Party of Canada
CCF .................. Cooperative Commonwealth Federation
DLP .................. Dominion Labour Party
HCA .................. Housewives and Consumers' Association
IWA .................. Industrial Woodworker's of America
LPP .................. Labour Progressive Party
LSA .................. League for Socialist Action
MWBIU .............. Marine Workers and Boiler-makers Industrial Union
RWP .................. Revolutionary Workers' Party
SEL .................. Socialist Educational League
SWL .................. Socialist Workers' League
SWP .................. Socialist Workers' Party
WLL ................. Women's Labour Leagues
WPC .................. Workers' Party of Canada
WUL .................. Workers' Unity League
INTRODUCTION

Popular belief has it that feminism died after the success of the suffrage movement in Canada, and socialism, especially of the revolutionary variety, decreased in relevance as the century wore on. Especially in the 1950s when the post war mixed economy provided more for most citizens and the "feminine mystique" reigned as a cultural goal, socialists and women's rights activists were thought to have become no longer necessary. Paradoxically, Ruth Bullock, a working-class Vancouver housewife, revolutionary and birth-control and abortion activist, was at the height of her grassroots political career during the late 1940s and 1950s. This thesis examines aspects of women's involvement in work for socialism and women's rights through the life and political involvement of one woman. It traces her political development and activity in the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), in the Trotskyist movement and in the provision of contraception and abortion information for women when this was illegal. The thesis also examines the "woman question" in the party to which Ruth devoted many years of her life.

Ruth was a 'political animal' from an early age. Growing up in a home where socialist utopian literature was the basis of the family library, she joined a number of progressive groups as an adult including the CCF in its formative years. By the mid-1940s she had moved further left to a Trotskyist perspective, which she has retained to this day. In addition to her high level of activity which was required by this vanguard formation, and her continued involvement in the CCF and later the New Democratic Party (NDP), she undertook from the mid-1930s until the late 1960s to provide information and contacts for working-class women about birth control and abortion. Participating in both partisan groups with men and in non-partisan female networks she worked with "doubled vision" to accomplish her political and social goals.¹

¹ For discussion of this concept see Jill McCalla Vickers, "Feminist Approaches to Women in Politics," Beyond the Vote, Canadian Women and Politics, eds. Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster (Toronto: University
With a very engaging personality and a willingness to reflect upon the past Ruth was a pleasure to interview. Her story is worth preserving. Others who have worked with her at different times over her long and varied career feel the same way. Indeed, Cynthia Flood, award-winning author and former comrade, created a fictional character based on Ruth.\(^2\) Ruth herself wondered about the significance of her “ordinary” life, having once been referred to by a Trotskyist comrade as “another God-damned housewife,” in fact in 1985 she cast herself in the role of “Jimmy Higgins”.\(^3\)

The thesis poses a number of questions about the “woman question” within Ruth’s chosen political arena, the Trotskyist movement. Since this group inherited many of the same theoretical readings on women as the Communist Party of Canada, might their orientation be the same as the Communists? Since they operated in the same political context as other socialists might their actions be similar? Of particular relevance is what an emphasis on democratic process and education, self-professed hallmarks of Trotskyism, meant for women’s access to decision-making and leadership. Were women more

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2 Flood stated that Ruth was an “inspiration” to younger women and very supportive of motherhood as a choice when it was not in vogue among feminists in the early 1970s. She was glad that an account of Ruth’s activities was finally being written and stated that the female character in the story “Beatrice” in her The Animals and Their Elements is based on Ruth. Author’s discussion with Cynthia Flood.

Beatrice is described in the early 60s in the following way: “She is folding her hands in her lap again, smiling gently. She could be a teacher at a girl’s school. Curly pepper-and-salt hair, neat features, pale skin, glasses; a dark blue cotton dress, white summer sandals; composed, reserved, calm, what the hell is the word to describe that I-am-my-own-person air? There she is and everything about her says she should be at the village concert to raise money for the restoration of the Norman arches in the church. But instead she’s here cheering for some pinko peasants in a hot messy little country somewhere off the coast of the States” “Beatrice,” The Animals and Their Elements (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987), p. 26.

3 Jimmy Higgins, a character in an novel by Upton Sinclair, the prolific American socialist writer, was the party member who put out the chairs, spent hours decorating halls, got leaflets printed, walked around town getting storekeepers to allow candidates signs to be placed in their windows and who got to serve on all the work committees and none of the honorary committees. Thus the term refers to the hard working, loyal and seldom recognized rank and file member. Jimmy Higgins (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919).
successfully integrated in all aspects of the Trotskyists’ work because of this process? Did such an emphasis serve to prevent gender discrimination?

Women such as Ruth found that issues of women’s rights not addressed by the political parties could be dealt with through non-partisan activity such as female networks. But how did working-class women involved in both socialist movements and non-partisan activities aid other females? Did these women consider this additional activity ‘political’ in that they were trying to change society? In gaining access to birth control and abortions, what motivated women, and what reasoning did they use for wanting to control their reproduction?

There are limited primary sources pertaining to socialist activists and in particular women in radical politics. One source is the radical press, although this must be carefully evaluated because it was intended for public consumption and carried the party’s political line. Issues of the Worker’s Voice from August 1935 to July 1939 were surveyed. A fairly complete collection of Labour Challenge (1945-1952) which was published monthly and sometimes twice a month, plus a complete collection of the Worker’s Vanguard which was published monthly from late 1955 throughout the rest of the decade are available in the Special Collections at the University of British Columbia.

In these publications, general articles on the development of the Trotskyist movement and its political positions, as well as all articles on or by women were examined. However, some material written by women was about general or international topics, and was lifted from American publications, and thus did not shed light on the woman question in the Canadian party. A regular column written by ‘Mary Wood’ (Bunny Hunter and later Ruth Houle) in Toronto dealt with topics related to women. Although it had no name specifically linking it to women, it was the closest the Trotskyists came in the 1940s and 1950s to a women’s column.

Because of its influence on Canadian Trotskyist women, a documentary study published by the American Trotskyists on a debate relating to women in the 1950s provided
insights. Additionally, a McCarthy-era (1955) novel, \textit{Down the Long Table} by Earl Birney, was examined for background on leftists opposed to the Communists in Vancouver during the 1950s.

The Ruth and Reg Bullock Collection at UBC has only recently been completely catalogued. As an institutional source, it provides internal documentation of the Trotskyist movement in western Canada from the 1940s to the 1980s. The most useful documents in this collection proved to be the Vancouver branch minutes, political correspondence, submissions to political discussions and committee reports. While much information on activities relating to women was available for the 1960s and 1970s, less existed for the earlier period reflecting the fact that the "woman question" was not a high priority for the party.

Oral history is another method that can help to provide more information about groups which have been excluded from written history. Although those who are still active may reflect partisan views, the result when balanced and combined with written sources will be a more democratic history. This author held extensive interviews with Ruth Bullock. Tape recordings were made and transcripts produced. As well, a transcript of an interview with Ruth conducted by Sara Diamond for the "Women's Labour History Collection" in the SFU archives was used, as was Jurgen Hesse's transcript and documentary for the CBC "Ideas" program on Trotskyists which combined interviews of several Canadians including Ruth. The private collection of Ruth Bullock, including correspondence not contributed to the UBC collection, was utilized. In addition, historian Elaine Bernard, granted me access to her private collection of Trotskyist documents and research into this area.

\[^4^\text{Joseph Hansen, and Evelyn Reed, } \textit{Cosmetics, Fashions, and the Exploitation of Women} \text{(New York: Pathfinder, 1987).}\]

\[^5^\text{Paul Thompson, } \textit{The Voice of the Past Oral History} \text{(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).}\]
The experiences and activities of Ruth Bullock, may be used as a lens to focus on both the woman question in her party and on non-partisan political work for grass-roots women's control of reproduction. By providing answers to the above questions, this thesis will shed light on a small corner of the history of Canadian women in public and domestic politics in the 1940s and 1950s.
CHAPTER 1

Partisan and Independent Political Choices for Women and Socialism

The focus of this thesis is on Ruth Bullock, the “woman question” and Canadian Trotskyism in the 1940s and 50s, of which virtually nothing is generally known. As the history of the Trotskyist cadre in general, and of Trotskyist women in particular is to a large degree undocumented, this study makes broad use of oral history in an attempt to “save” some of Ruth’s experiences through the vehicle of biography.

Inevitably the study focuses on British Columbia, where Ruth lived and worked. Vancouver and Toronto were the only major centres for Trotskyist organizing in Canada, and it may be surmised that the experiences for women within the movement in either city would have been similar. Bullock joined the Trotskyist movement in Canada when it was temporarily rejuvenated after World War II, but the organization(s) during this period did not change greatly in size, methods of action, nor in patterns of recruitment. The situation remained stable until a relatively large influx of students joined in the 1960s; this new group ushered in different perspectives on many topics including the “woman question”. Ruth continued her activities in the 1960s but the focus of this thesis is on the 1940s and 50s when Ruth’s independent work for women to procure birth control and abortion was most significant, and the contradictions around the “woman question” were most extreme. At a time when living with a man without being married was unusual, and when birth control and abortion were illegal, Ruth herself “lived without the benefit of clergy” and helped other women control the reproductive aspect of their lives. Yet in general, Ruth fit her political concerns and causes into a life busy with childcare, housework mostly done

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without the aid of labour-saving devices, shopping, cooking, gardening and membership in various women's groups. Ruth's life is of interest because her experiences were both typical and atypical for working-class women in the post-war period. On the one hand, she was a housewife and mother who worked primarily in the home, while on the other she acted to overthrow capitalist society, and made, we argue, noteworthy contributions to the British Columbia women's movement.

Within socialist and revolutionary movements, the term “the woman question” has been variously used to refer to the analysis of women's oppression in society, theories as to how the status of women might be improved, and debates over policy designed to ensure equality or increased representation and power for women within the party. Marxist analysis, of course, viewed the working-class as the only class capable of saving humanity from 'barbarism', while Leninists believed only a revolutionary party could lead the class to fulfil its historic mission. Trotskyists, who split or were expelled from the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) in the late twenties and thirties, nonetheless shared many of the CPC's assumptions about the workers' movement, privileging activities within the trade unions and, in general, the paid labour force. Thus women who worked outside the home for wages were seen as more likely to initiate social change or join the revolutionary movement. Housewives were often, if not typically, regarded as marginal to the class struggle since they had no connection to the workplace except through their families. Needless to say, Ruth's economic position as a "housewife" did not gain her prestige within the revolutionary movement, nor did the small Marxist groups to which she gravitated never approached the CPC in size or strength.

Ruth's activities do, however, merit close attention in light of new definitions of political institutions and political activity which have been elaborated by feminist scholars in

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Canada. Jill McCalla Vickers has defined political institutions as “structures that survive and pursue coherent goals over time and space,” while Joan Sangster and Linda Kealey have defined women’s political action as “all organized initiatives by women to change the structure of society.” Such definitions expand the scope of inquiry into women’s political pasts, to include the history of small groups, local and community politics, and figures who were less than national leaders. Angela Miles has stressed the ‘transformative’ potential of feminist politics, and Ruth Bullock’s work for birth control and abortion rights in 1940s and 50s are indeed an excellent example. Who can say that her grassroots political career did not have an effect on longer-term social change?

Women like Bullock have also made choices about where to focus their activities for the best results for their social and political concerns. Sylvia Bashevkin’s identification of a tension between ‘independence’ and ‘partisanship’ for Canadian women is relevant to Ruth’s career as both a party cadre and as an independent actor. In a similar vein McCalla Vickers builds on Miles’ notion of an ‘integrative’ feminist politics when women are able to see value in both autonomous actions and more conventional political formations, and coins the term ‘doubled vision’. McCalla Vickers also suggests that these tensions may be internalized within individual women and this appears to have been the case with Ruth Bullock. This is to say that she believed that her concerns for revolutionary social change would be best served in an integrated party structure; at the same time, as this study will show her concerns for women’s sexual freedom would be mainly addressed through a


9 Joan Sangster and Linda Kealey, “Introduction,” in Beyond the Vote, p. 11.

10 Angela Miles, cited Ibid, p. 11.

11 Bashevskin, “Independence verses Partisanship”.


largely unstructured personal network. For Ruth an ongoing tension existed between her time commitment to the Trotskyist movement which demanded her primary political allegiance, and her work for women in other groupings which was considered by the movement to be of less importance and only “tolerated” as long as it did not interfere with what they considered her “real” political work.

Ruth Bullock’s radical choices, beginning with early membership in the British Columbia CCF, were in keeping with overall trends in the inter-war period. Sangster maintains that after World War I women were more numerous and vocal than ever before in left wing parties, and that this phenomenon may have been the result of the particular problems and possibilities of the suffrage victory.¹⁴ At a critical juncture, the Canadian women’s movement had been led by fairly conventional middle-class reformers who publicly stressed their Protestant and family values. Carol Bacchi claims that it was not surprising that such ‘suffragists’ retreated to the home, since their concern was to impose a class and religious agenda rather than to alter traditional gender roles.¹⁵ While a minority of ‘first wave’ feminists argued from an equal rights stance, the dominant ideology has been dubbed, not inaccurately, maternalist.¹⁶ According to standard accounts in the 1920s Canadian feminists were marginalized as their reform agendas were either discarded (notably prohibition) or absorbed into the mainstream of Canadian politics.¹⁷ However, recent work suggests that the political picture was rather more complex. Veronica


¹⁵ Carol Lee Bacchi, Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), passim.


Strong-Boag has made the case that the suffragists’ concerns arose in part from women's awareness of their vulnerability in the home because of the social changes associated with industrialization. Thus their demands did represent a challenge to patriarchal authority which continued beneath the surface.\textsuperscript{18} Elsewhere Strong-Boag has argued that women in English Canada turned their attention to private political questions in the decades following suffrage but this fails to explain adequately the gravitation of many women to the left.\textsuperscript{19}

Sangster asserts that in the inter-war period while feminism was no longer so visible, it persisted in socialist and revolutionary parties.\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, Patricia Roome and a number of other historians have addressed this topic.\textsuperscript{21} Studies which are sensitive to the issues of class, culture, ethnicity and region are revealing that women in the CPC, for example continued to define their politics at the local and community level, despite their affiliation to an international communist movement, which had specifically repudiated ‘Feminism’ by the 1930s\textsuperscript{22} Women’s profile in such parties may have increased because greater numbers worked at paid labour in a period of recurrent economic crisis. Sangster contends that for both the CCF and the Communists, women’s maternal interests remained

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as a rationale for female involvement in socialist politics, or at least as a theme around which to garner support.\textsuperscript{23}

The leaders of the CPC drawing on the writings of Marx, Engels, Bebel and especially Lenin saw the ‘woman question’ and women’s oppression as an outgrowth of class society and capitalism. They appealed to women on an economic basis as workers, or as managers of the ‘family wage’. The correct strategy for women was to engage in the class struggle for a social revolution. Some Marxists within the CCF including Ruth Bullock, used writings such as Engels’ not only to explain women’s class oppression but to touch on the sexual oppression of women, a subject to which Lenin was notoriously insensitive.\textsuperscript{24} Other traditions in the eclectic mixture of Fabianism, Christian Socialism, Utopianism, Labourism and radical agrarianism which comprised the CCF did not stress gender equality and there was no coherent overall analysis of women’s oppression. There was only an agreement that it was not men who oppressed women but rather an exploitative or immoral economic system.\textsuperscript{25}

Within the leftist movements of the 1920s and 30s special measures for women and the initiation of affiliated or semiautonomous women’s organizations helped integrate

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\textsuperscript{23} Sangster, \textit{Dreams of Equality}, p. 237.
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\textsuperscript{24} For a summary of the pronouncements of classical Marxism see \textit{The Woman Question: Selections from the writings of Marx, Lenin, Engels, and Stalin} (New York: International Publishers, 1951); Engels, \textit{Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State} (1884); V.I. Lenin, \textit{On the Emancipation of Women} (1934); or the Socialist Party of America’s 1910 pamphlet, \textit{Woman and Socialism}, which were apparently widely read. For a careful discussion of the Marxist influences see Joan Sangster, \textit{Dreams of Equality}, pp. 13-19. When Ruth read Lenin’s interview with Clara Zetkin in \textit{Lenin on the Woman Question} (1934), she was evidently not impressed: “And I must say that I was pretty bloody disgusted since I was one of these myself and quite aware of what Lenin was saying when he said and I quote: ‘What man would be interested in using the glass from which another man had, (drank)’ I thought that wasn’t exactly the keenest comment I’d ever heard!” Transcript of interview Heather McLeod with Ruth Bullock, 30 January 1985, p. 11. Please note that all three interviews cited are with Ruth Bullock and are differentiated by interviewer. The two by Heather McLeod are also differentiated by year.
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women to party life, occasionally providing forums for debate on the ‘woman question’. Radical organizations varied in their support for semi-autonomous women’s activities; in general, however, they did not have relationships with the rest of the women’s movement, such as it was. Socialist parties had a tradition of organizing women in separate organizations because this was an effective tool for education and mobilization. Previous to World War I, the ‘impossibilist’ Socialist Party of Canada did not grant special status for women in contrast to the ‘reformist’ Social Democratic Party which supported separate organizing and immediate reforms. In all cases, ‘bourgeois’ women’s groups and the main-stream suffrage campaign were regarded with suspicion. The number of women attracted to leftist movements was in any case limited.

In the 1920s, the Communist Left was still shadow-boxing the ghost of the suffragists and developed its policies in part to preclude women from being drawn to the ‘bourgeois’ women’s movement. The CPC in the twenties set up a so-called Women’s Bureau, and prompted the formation of the Women’s Labour Leagues, “mass organizations” which were not totally composed of party members. The priorities included: radicalizing women on home, family and consumer issues, supporting working women, self education and support. In addition, the CPC initiated The Woman Worker, official organ of the Federation of Canadian Women’s Labour Leagues, which published monthly from 1926 to 1929. Sangster concludes that the Leagues were moderately successful and that through them the party had some real influence on the significance and the definition of the “women’s question” in Canada in the 1920s. Yet the Women’s Labour Leagues were clearly controlled from above, and were a noteworthy casualty of the “Stalinization” of the

26 Ibid; Roome, “Amelia Turner”; Some individuals chose to participate in both partisan and independent groups consistent with Bashevkin’s notion of a “doubled vision.” A few studies notably those by Roome, “Amelia Turner”, and Crowley, Agnes MacPhail, passim have responded to this dichotomy.


28 Sangster, Dreams of Equality, pp. 43-44.
party. During the ultra-left “third period” in the early 1930s the Leagues were directed to affiliate with the Worker’s Unity League, the CPC’s so-called revolutionary trade union federation. This considerably narrowed the possibilities for autonomous organizations of women, and significantly, when the party turned to the Popular Front tactic in the mid-30s, the CPC did not renew separate organizing for women; in a few cases the “women’s auxiliaries” of the WUL unions would be reborn under the banner of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO).  

Despite those like Agnes MacPhail, MP, who warned that special organizational measures for women within political parties were wrong because women had to struggle to be treated equally not differently, there were, in the CCF throughout the ’30s and ’40s, many women’s committees which worked at fund raising, educational work, leadership training and social action for women. These committees differed in their strength and in their emphasis. Some focused on traditional support work and helped members to more easily integrate into the party, while others were more militant and challenged women with “political” tasks. These committees acted as pressure groups to push for initiatives regarding women within the federation. While some feared “feminist control”, Sangster argues that these groups kept the “woman question” alive within the CCF. An ambivalent and sometimes negative view of women’s organizations in the British Columbia CCF explains why the provincial party’s Women’s Council in the 1930s and ’40s rarely exhibited independent leadership. However, some individual activists joined a variety of outside groups as an outlet for their concerns about female status. As was the case with

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30 Sangster, Dreams of Equality, pp. 104-121.

the Ontario CCF’s Women’s Joint Committee, the leadership of the BC Council supported what we would now call women’s issues, but eschewed a feminist analysis.32

Regardless of their theoretical nuances, the practice of socialist parties largely replicated the “capitalist” sexual division of labour. Men held most of the leadership and important political positions, while most women worked behind the scenes at the grassroots level: electioneering, fundraising and convening social, educational, youth and cultural work. It was much more unusual for women to be involved as theoreticians, union organizers or policymakers.33 During the Popular Front period an increased number of positions of leadership became open to individual women in the CPC and immediately following the war, some female leaders strengthened their positions, but in general women played secondary roles in the party because of economic dependence, the double burden of work and children, and sexism within the party. Similarly within the CCF women were under represented both at conventions and as candidates for election. As in the “bourgeois” parties, women’s responsibility for child rearing was a major barrier to greater political participation.34

Most available evidence supports the contention that “maternalism” was as commonplace on the leftist vanguard as it had been in the much-maligned suffrage movement. Campaigns reflected this ideology, however, the emphasis varied for the Communists in different periods, according to the directives from the Comintern, and with changing social and political events in Canada. The Mothers’ Committee, a joint venture of Communist and social-democratic women in Vancouver, held a Mothers’ Day demonstration in 1935 to protest conditions in the relief camps for the unemployed, while in 1949 Vancouver Communists targeted women in their Mothers’ Day “Action for Peace”,

32 Manley, “Women and the Left”.

33 Sangster, Dreams of Equality, p. 229.

because of their supposed special interest in peace as nurturers, mothers and wives. This political appeal to women reinforced their responsibility for the family, and did little to help remove barriers to their public political activity.35

Among social democratic groups like the Calgary Labor Party bourgeois respectability was practically the norm.36 Some women who came to the early CCF saw a connection between socialism, pacifism and feminism. They brought with them maternalist ideas which explained why women should be politically active and how the federation’s work with women should be oriented. From the CCF’s inception women were portrayed by the party as an interest group influenced by their key role in the family. Additionally, it was felt that if housewives were not radicalized, their conservatism might influence family members.37

Wage-earning women were seen as an important audience and as a possible source of party support by socialist and revolutionary parties, although the emphasis varied between them. As a result of its ceaseless attempts to capture the trade unions for communism the CPC probably did more consistent work in this area. The “red” unions achieved some progress in the organization of women workers in areas such as the needle trades in the 1930s. During the Popular Front, working women’s struggles were championed within the context of the CIO, and during World War II the Party called for equal pay, child-care, training and guaranteed post-war employment for women. However Sangster points out that unions sympathetic to the Party were too committed to their

35 Ibid, pp. 141, 190, 235. Additionally much adaptation to the ideals of popular culture meant that questioning sexist social norms, including that of mother and sex object, became impossible. For example, the BC Communist Pacific Tribune sponsored beauty pageants for union women in the 1940s!

36 Roome, Beyond the Vote, p. 92.

support for the war effort to confront employers over such concerns and in the post war period such demands were by no means sustained.38

In the 1930s and 40s, some female activists in the BC CCF were concerned about the conditions which faced working women, and developed resolutions on nursery schools, 'equal pay for equal work', the inclusion of domestic workers in the Minimum Wage Act, and training programs making domestic workers eligible for unemployment insurance and workmen's compensation benefits.39 What later came to be known as 'women's liberation' was not on the agenda of the socialist and revolutionary parties of the Old Left; women's issues such as birth control and abortion, most notably, received scant attention.40 Nevertheless, efforts were made by individuals such as Ruth Bullock or local women's groups to confront the politics of contraception and sexual discrimination. In BC in the 1930s and '40s significant debates took place in the CCF Women's Council on the changing of discriminatory divorce laws and the need for birth control clinics.41

Many females who sought active involvement in political parties after women gained the vote remained unmarried or were most active after their children had grown. The fact that women believed they had to make a choice points to one of the major barriers to women's participation in public political life. The responsibilities of child care, unless one was wealthy, were a great obstacle to the participation of housewives on a continuing basis. Women without personal wealth or financial support through marriage had to dedicate themselves to politics as a career at which they could support themselves. The few single working-class or farm women active in socialist politics could often be found employed by unions, political parties or other progressive associations. Though 'women's


40 Sangster, "Canadian Women in Radical Politics", p. 392.

41 Walsh, "Equality, Emancipation", p. 79; see also Manley, "Women and the Left", p. 117.
issues' were not much attended to, these activists did not fail to identify with their sister's concerns. Indeed Agnes MacPhail, MP, believed that the urge to "mother the world" was greater in childless women, a strange variation on the maternalist-socialist theme.

Three such women are Agnes MacPhail, Member of Parliament for Southeast Grey County, Ontario (1921-1940), and Member of the Ontario Legislature for York East (1943-1951), Amelia Turner a Calgarian involved first in the Dominion Labour Party and then the CCF, and Beatrice Brigden who began as a Methodist Church social purity lecturer quietly supportive of maternal feminism, and moved through the DLP and the Manitoba Independent Labour Party to the CCF. Like many other women pursuing careers and public politics in this period, they remained single while politically active.

Susan Walsh's comparison of the career paths of four of Ruth Bullock's contemporaries in the British Columbia CCF (Dorothy Steeves, Grace MacInnis, Laura Jamieson, and Helena Gutteridge) shows the influence of family, educational background and contacts, and illustrates how the four leaders learned from participating in other women's reform groups. Steeves, MacInnes and Jamieson were able to combine marriage with public political activity in part because of their education and class positions; Steeves trained as a lawyer in Holland, while MacInnes was the daughter of the founder of the CCF, J.S. Woodsworth and the wife of a CCF MP, Angus MacInnis. Laura Jamieson was university-educated and became a juvenile court judge. Gutteridge was the only working-class woman among the four. She left her family at thirteen and supported herself at various trades throughout her life. While she was politically active during the struggle for


43 Crowley, Agnes MacPhail, pp. 90, 111; Roome, "Amelia Turner" p. 103; and Sangster, "The Making of a Socialist Feminist".
suffrage in BC before 1920 and again in the 1930s with the CCF, it is significant that the period of Gutterridge’s brief marriage coincided with her absence from public political life in the 1920s.44

Less well known are the lives of women in the Communist movement, the biographies of whom tend to be short and casually written. Dorothy Livesay’s autobiographical collection describes the depression period, attitudes towards women and her experience as a journalist for the CPC press. A short article by Anna B. Woywitka describes Ukrainian immigrant Teklia Chaban’s support of striking coal miners in the 1920s and 30s and her membership in the Ukrainian Labour Temple Association which was affiliated to the CPC. Louise Watson’s hagiographic biography of Annie Buller outlines her activities as a leader and functionary of the CPC on both union and women’s issues but does not reveal any differences Buller might have had with official party policies.45

While some exceptional women took their political concerns to the public arena, others practised a radical form of domestic feminism in the home. The politics of contraception (and sometimes abortion) animated an unknown number of working-class women after the suffrage victory. Ruth Bullock was one of many in the CCF who, in addition to working in partisan structures at the grass roots directed considerable political energies to this single issue.46


Section 207C of the Criminal Code of Canada adopted in 1892 made the provision of birth control and abortions illegal. However the legislation appears to have been ineffective in curbing the practises of birth control and abortion because despite this the fertility rate declined. After all, using contraception made good sense now that having a large family was no longer a sound economic strategy, just as the ideal of being a romantic wife and devoted mother emerged. Women sought control of their reproduction, however prohibitive costs meant that only the well-to-do could afford the devices and preparations.47

The forces of the church, the police and the medical profession controlled the territory of reproductive rights. Pitted against them was the birth control movement including the neo-Malthusians who reasoned that the poor were to blame for their own economic misery if they did not employ contraception. Communists in the 1920s were suspicious of neo-Malthusian reasoning and argued that birth control was a form of social control over women’s right to bear children.48 The MacLarens argue that by the end of the 1930s, the neo-Malthusians held the reins of the movement for the legitimization of birth control.49

Socialist feminists and socialists also exerted considerable influence, however. Britain’s Marie Stopes and American Margaret Sanger did not adopt the conventional


48 A. R. Kaufman a philanthropist from Kitchener, Ontario was motivated by concern over the growth of the poorer classes to fund a cheap and simple birth control and distribution system in the 30s. He employed married women such as Vivian Dowding, a CCF’er who worked in B.C. from 1937 to 1944, to distribute information in the form of price lists, while the materials were mailed discreetly in plain wrappers. Bishop, “Vivian Dowding.”

'economic' perspective, and along with some thinkers on the left, maintained that women had a right to sexual pleasure, to control the size of their families, to maintain their health and have well cared for children. In B.C. socialist feminists such as the poet and politician A.M. Stephens in the 1920s, and later the CCF legislators Dr. Lyle Telford, and Dorothy Steeves as well as the Vancouver school trustee Mildred Osterhout led the campaign. Prompted by Marie Stopes’ visit to the city in 1923, debates on contraception were published in the B.C. Federationist and the Canadian Birth Control League flourished for a period. Later in the 1930s, a clinic was established. The MacLarens do not explore the provision of contraception except by doctors and druggists, however, Mary Bishop’s research indicates that in B.C., grass roots socialist women provided contraceptives through networks of female contacts.50

Maternal feminists believed that motherhood was unavoidable, and that in fact women’s power derived from this role. Some also feared that mechanical birth control devices were dangerous and that with contraception freely available, men’s sexual demands would increase. Busy elsewhere, in the 1920s they were concerned that involvement in such a cause might interfere with their work for various legal reforms.51 Later the tough economic circumstances of the 1930s prompted them to act in support of women’s rights, and with them came the English Canadian establishment who also favoured legitimating contraception because it would reduce the monies paid out for poor relief. Despite the turn in public opinion, there were to be no legislative reforms for three more decades. Thus the


51 MacLaren and MacLaren, The Bedroom, pp. 67-69.
dangerous work by grass roots women like Ruth Bullock still required daring and commitment throughout the 1940s, 50s and 60s.52

The particular branch of the broad left movement which Ruth Bullock eventually decided to join inherited the same assumptions, theoretical works, methods of organizing and attitudes towards the "woman question" as did the CPC or the CCF. However, the Trotskyists were distinct, to some extent.53 Trotskyists believed that a democratic process and member education might prevent what they saw as the bureaucratization and the formation of cliques in the Stalinist and Social Democratic parties.54 They emphasized the


53 By 1928 Stalin, had triumphed in the Soviet Union and “Stalinism” or the Soviet bureaucracy dominated the Communist International. Leon Trotsky and the Left Oppositionists who opposed this trend, or those suspected to be associated with his ideas, were expelled from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and from the different national sections of the C.I. The CPC expelled a hitherto powerful group of oppositionists’ in 1928-30 including party leader Jack MacDonald. Thereafter, Stalinists used the term “Trotskyite” in a pejorative sense, while the followers of Trotsky referred to themselves as “Trotskyists”.


54 The full political program of the Trotskyist movement was drawn from the entire revolutionary Marxist canon, ranging from the Communist Manifesto to the latest resolutions of the Fourth International. However the core proposals are found in Leon Trotsky’s “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International” (1938), in his *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973). The program outlined three kinds of political actions which corresponded to different objective situations and levels of revolutionary consciousness of the masses. The first actions were democratic demands which would defend human rights and civil liberties. These could be basic, such as defending freedom of thought, freedom of the press or freedom of organization. They also included defending the right to form unions. The second actions included partial or immediate demands which involved the defence and improvement of the standard of living of the masses. Slogans calling for a rise in wages and the end to a wage freeze were examples of this type. Through both these levels of struggle workers would gain organizational cohesiveness and battle experience. At the third level, the transitional demands were broader. Their purpose was to lead workers to the conclusion that capitalism could not meet the needs of the working class. These demands were in fact only realizable under socialism. Economic demands pointed the way to a planned economy and political demands pointed to the establishment of a workers’ government. Some examples of transitional demands were proposals for a sliding scale of wages and hours, factory committees, workers’ control of production, a workers’ militia and the expropriation of separate groups of capitalists. Thus as workers gained consciousness they would move towards socialism. The methods were dictated by the strengths of the proletariat: the use of its position in the economic system and mobilization of its large numbers. Trotsky’s political program was considered to be a core guideline but was not set in stone. It needed to be developed in relation to the specific objective circumstances by
Leninist method of "democratic centralism," however, they also added new provisions. Bound not to repeat the mistakes of the CPC, several groups flourished in the 1930s and practised a demanding, theoretical politics. Trotskyists attempted to recruit left wingers from the CCF by working within the Federation; Ruth Bullock was a typical cadre in that she was recruited from the CCF and that later, she attempted to influence others in the Federation to join the Trotskyist cadre.

The earliest Trotskyist groups in Canada were organized in and around Toronto by ex-communists Maurice Spector, Jack MacDonald and Morris Quarter around 1932. Some of these members formed the Toronto branch of the International Left Opposition which functioned as a branch of the Communist League of America. The Toronto group published youth papers including The Spark in 1932 and October Youth. By the middle of 1933, Trotskyist activity and influence had increased. There were between 1000 and 1500 revolutionary parties. Trotskyists had first to analyse situations and see the movement of trends, then they would put forward slogans and adjust them in relation to the responses of the masses. It was incorrect and fruitless for a revolutionary party to put forward slogans which were too advanced for a specific situation. The point was to approach the masses at whatever level they were at, and to draw them through progressive struggles and education toward a higher level of thought and action, joining in the direction of socialist revolution. In the transitional program Trotsky outlined several sectors of the world and the importance of advancing different sets of slogans or differently weighted slogans relevant to each situation. See George Novak, "The Role of the Transitional Program in the Revolutionary Process" in Trotsky: The Transitional Program, 1973, pp. 38-71; Joseph Hanson, "Introduction to the Transitional Program" ibid, pp. 9-31.

Democratic centralism, the Leninist principle of organizing, allowed for broad-ranging discussion on an issue within party ranks. However, once a discussion had been officially ended and the vote was taken, the democratic rule of the majority dictated that all members had to abide by and act upon the majority decision. Only the majority decision was presented to the outside world through the party press and debate was kept inside the organization. The minority did not have to give up its views but had to wait until another official discussion period set by the party to bring them up again. There could be discussion on any topic at any time if it was organized by official bodies of the party. Discussions could be both written and oral, or only literary so as not to interrupt the day-to-day work of branches. Previous to national conventions there was a two-to-four month discussion period, during which any topic could be raised by any member. This provided reasonable frequency to bring up minority viewpoints. The method required that all agree on the party’s political program and principles. Within that agreement there was room for political differences. Members were allowed to organize tendencies and factions around a specific viewpoint, and were to argue their differences on the basis of principle. In this way differences could be resolved democratically, the party could remain stable, policies could be carried out by all and mistakes could be corrected without disruption of the party. This brand of democratic centralism was no guarantee that the party would not degenerate as the Communist Party had, because the method had to be applied dialectically to ever changing situations. In addition, the process of educating members and prevention of the formation of cliques were important to prevent "Stalinization". Dobbs, "The Structure and Organizational Principles".
people at meetings organized in August of that year. The youth paper became the Young Militant in 1933 which symbolized that by now Trotskyists had given up on the idea of reforming the Third international and were working towards the building of a Fourth. By 1934, the senior organization had also changed its name to the Worker’s Party of Canada. By the end of 1934, there were 250 members across Canada. The Vanguard party organ published from 1932 to 1936. Esther Birney, an early participant, described their meetings: “Mostly we gathered on every other Sunday and talked like Rabbis splitting hairs on whether it should be this particular Marxist interpretation or that. We were idealistic and I think we thought that this would bring the workers to us if we were honest, and if we had the best program to offer them.” She added: “They were heroic times... We really thought that we would have to die, and that we would usher in this age of the coming revolution that would bring peace. And there would be no more fascism and there would be no more war, and ... we’d enter into this millennium that the Christians talk about.”

In 1934, some members split to join the Organizing Committee for a Revolutionary Workers Party. Known as the “Field group” after the leader B.J. Field, this group was considered by the other Trotskyists to be ultra-left theoreticians who were not interested in action. They published the Workers’ Voice in April and May 1934, and gained some publicity in the late 30s. They also discussed reuniting with the rest of the Canadian Trotskyists, but did not. They disappeared just before WW II.

In Vancouver, the first branch of the Trotskyist movement was established in 1933 by Earl Birney and Sylvia Johnstone. In 1935, the Vancouver Trotskyists entered the CCF


and seem to have held the upper hand for a time in the Stanley Park club. They were influential in the Vancouver Centre CCF club in the late 1930s.58

Dense factional struggles within the Canadian movement continued. The leadership under Macdonald had seized upon the possibility of boring within the CCF but this idea, labelled ‘entryism’, had only slight majority support and led to a split in the WPC in 1936. Only less well known and less experienced comrades were actually able to get into the CCF. Many supporters of the entry became disillusioned and dropped away. However, the two groups which had split in 1936 reunified at the founding convention of the Socialist Worker’s Party (SWP) in the US in 1938. Within the year, the regrouped Trotskyists proceeded with ‘open entryism’ and formed the Socialist Policy Group within the CCF. They planned to have a complete programmatic and political fight with the leadership and to prepare for a split, taking many of the best left-wingers with them. They put out a mimeographed bulletin, Socialist Action. However, by mid-November of that year, twelve prominent members had already been expelled from the CCF; those unable to get back into the CCF formed the Socialist Workers League, the Canadian Section of the Fourth International. Composed of about 75 people, this group continued publishing Socialist Action. In 1939 the Trotskyist movement had scarcely more of a presence on the political scene than it had enjoyed in 1930. With the outbreak of war, the SWL was declared illegal; however, many members continued on in the CCF. One of the younger members in Toronto, Ross Dowson, began work to rebuild the Trotskyist forces in 1942 and their bulletin continued to be published until 1944.59

58 Birney, a well-known Canadian author, wrote a McCarthy era novel entitled Down the Long Table based on this experience. In it, he out-lines some of the real-life characters and historical events associated with the workers’ struggles of the period. Earl Birney, Down the Long Table (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1955: republished with an introduction by Bruce Nesbitt in 1975). A letter still possessed by Ruth Bullock was written by Birney on Sept. 24, 1933. In it he reported on his efforts and described events which reveal that much of the content and characterization of the novel was taken from real life experience. Ruth Bullock, private collection.

As the Trotskyist forces regrouped some members were still searching to define what it meant to be a Trotskyist. By 1945 comrades were selling their new paper *Labour Challenge* and donating large amounts of money to the movement. Some thought conditions were ripe to set up an independent party. With the formation of the Revolutionary Worker’s Party (RWP) in 1946 the movement then took on a more unified structure and continued its recruitment efforts. Stressing self education, members worked hard and RWP leaders claimed that their ideas and organizing skills were successful in the ousting of the Communists from the British Columbia district of the IWA in the late 1940s. However, the two most active figures in this campaign, Lloyd Whalen and Tom Bradley then left the Trotskyist movement, while the IWA remained firmly under the control of right-wing CCF’ers.

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61 *Labour Challenge*, June, 1947, p. 4, cites Trotskyist ideas summed up in the 1947 RWP program which included the following demands:

1. Defend labour’s standard of living.
2. Full employment and job security for all workers and veterans!
3. Against all anti-labour laws and government strike-breaking!
4. Tax the rich—not the poor!
5. A billion dollar appropriation for government low-rent housing!
6. Against any and all forms of racial prejudice or national oppression!
7. A working class answer to capitalist militarism and war.
8. For a veteran’s organization sponsored by the trade unions!
9. Solidarity with the revolutionary struggles of the workers in all lands!
10. Independent working class political action! “

62 In February of 1949, the Vancouver branch held a trial for Whalen and Bradley, neither of whom attended. They were expelled for failure to abide by the terms of their leave of absence and “gross disloyalty” to the movement. Since both were members of the National Committee, the branch also recommended their expulsion from that body. Other men associated with Trotskyism in BC in the 40s and 50s were Harry Archibald (the CCF MP from Prince Rupert in 1945), Malcolm Bruce (a founding member of the CPC, exmember of their central committee, who joined with the Trotskyists in 1953), Fred MacNeil, Tom Griffin, Colin Cameron (BC MLA for Comox-Courtenay in the late 1930s), Rod Young, Glen Lamont, Dave Olsen, Tony Ryan, Bill White (a miner from Prince Rupert), Bill Whitney, Al Burton and John Smith. Women listed elsewhere; UBCA, Bullock collection, correspondence from Ross Dowson, Box
During the Cold War Trotskyists were under attack both from the right wing in the CCF as well as from the Communists, who had harassed them for years. However, members in Vancouver did not fear destabilizing their party when they showed a questioning predisposition towards the leadership over matters such as the centralized structure of the organization in 1947. Vancouver argued that they should not be hemmed in by a rigid formula which did not meet their needs. They wanted Members at Large to be able to relate to regional centres rather than to the national headquarters because it was difficult to communicate with those in small B.C. communities. The branch was reproved by the Political Committee who claimed that such a change was unconstitutional and added: "The constitution of our party has been tested for many years in the fires of the class struggle and has not been found wanting. We must not take a light-minded attitude towards it or be in too great a hurry to remove it." However, by raising the question, the Vancouver rank and file indicated that they knew this was a party where everyone could influence policies and structure. The branch continued with this questioning attitude throughout many political situations over the next decade.63

In 1949 many Trotskyists returned to the CCF where they focused on convincing left wingers of the value of their program. Dissatisfaction with the cautious political line of the Social Democrats was one reason for joining the Trotskyists. A. Burton of Trail, BC declared:

The decision I find I have to make is...between being a revolutionary socialist or being just another vacillating social democrat, a safe respectable reformist capitulating all down the line,...the sense of tidiness and hesitancy to act in a revolutionary

63 Outside of Vancouver, BC members were to be found in: Prince Rupert, Trail, Nanaimo, Britannia Beach, Alice Arm and Miles Landing. UBCA, Bullock collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, April 19, Sept. 3, 7, 26, Oct. 3, 1947; correspondence, Box 30-8, May 1947; correspondence National Political Committee to Vancouver branch, Box 30-21, April 1, Aug. 23, 1947; correspondence from Ross Dowson, Box 30-21, June 2, 1946, Mar 11, April 1, May 5, July 7, 1947, Jan, 27, 1948; Heather McLeod interview 1985 pp. 5,12.
manner...that one gradually finds creeping upon him...a fearfulness to act...too often I have seen good militant workers reduced to this despicable state after a period of time (in the CCF).64

Needless to say, this activist was successfully recruited.

When the RWP was officially dissolved in 1951, the movement survived in an underground fashion. Like an increasing number of Communists, Trotskyists practised ‘deep entry’ in the CCF which required clandestine activity because they were liable to face expulsion if they revealed their membership in revolutionary parties. Reg Bullock argued “the central task remains—build the Revolutionary Party. The strategic aim: leading the class to the conquest of power.” Debate within the Fourth International had come to the conclusion that in countries where the working class was “polarized” around existing parties and where it was not realistic to build a mass independent party, entry tactics were required. In the CCF, where until the mid 1950s Marxism was respectable, he argued with tortuous logic to defend the tactic: “Ideologically Trotskyism and Marxism are synonymous and, ipso facto, a Marxist can defend and extol Trotsky’s views while simultaneously disclaiming organizational ties.”65

In the mid-1950s struggles between the right and the left in the CCF resulted in many of the Ontario Trotskyists being expelled. Those who could not gain re-entry wanted to pursue open political activity and formed the Socialist Educational League in Toronto in 1956. The Vancouver branch demanded the reason for this action, thus initiating Thus a

64 UBCA, Bullock collection, correspondence from A. Burton to Ross Dowson, Box 30-21, Mar. 12, 1950

65 Other groups such as the Socialist Caucus, some of whom were members of the Communist Party, practised this approach to the BC CCF. Jack Scott, Bryan Palmer, ed., A Communist Life Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927-1985 (Committee on Canadian Labour History, St John’s, Newfoundland: 1988), pp. 140-158. The Trotskyist press was named Labour Challenge from 1945 to 1952, and The Worker’s Vanguard from Dec. 1955 to Jan. 1970. UBCA, Bullock collection, correspondence from A. Burton to Ross Dowson, Box 30-21, Mar. 12, 1950; correspondence from Ross Dowson, Box 30-21, Mar.1, Oct. 5, 23, 1949, Mar. 12, 23, April 26, 1950, Nov. 8, 1955; Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, April 20, 1947, Box 20-8, Aug. 9, 1956; correspondence, Box 30-7, July 31, 1952; correspondence from Reg Bullock to Ross Dowson, Box 30-2, Nov. 1955; “Contribution to the discussion on the Memorandum on the CCF and documents arising from it”, by “Briar”-Reg Bullock, Box 20-15, 1957; Heather McLeod interview 1985 pp. 7,15-17.
political discussion on the question of the Trotskyists' orientation to the CCF. In the meantime, in the CCF, a move to the right was signified by the Winnipeg Declaration and the "New Party" movement in the late 1950s.66

In 1957, the Vancouver branch became divided over the 'deep entry' tactic, and a faction was declared on the question of orientation to the CCF. A Control Commission attempted to solve the matter but decided that this was not a 'political' difference on orientation to the CCF, but a 'tactical' matter over how best to approach the CCF. There was obvious confusion over what constituted a political difference and was therefore a position on which a faction could be declared, and what was merely a tactical difference.67

In 1959, a split in Vancouver left Branch #1 isolated in support of the 'deep-entry' tactic. Branch #2 held several open political activities while receiving support from advisors of the American section of the Fourth International. Clara Fraser, a SWP organizer from Seattle concluded: "The issue... is quite clear: 'deep entry' versus building a 'living' Trotskyist movement. And it is clear that the most important local factor in the raising of the previously personalized bickerings to the level of a tactical orientation has been the emergence of Ruth as a branch leader who has a political line." There were high-handed interventions from Ross Dowson in Toronto, who had long functioned as the dominant leader of the Canadian section of the Fourth International, and Branch #1 stalled on a number of occasions in cooperating in a joint city committee.68


68 UBCA, Bullock collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-3, Jan. 29, Feb. 14, April 28, 1959, Jan. 31, 1960; correspondence from Clara Fraser to Ross Dowson, Box 30-4, July 21, 1959; correspondence from Ross Dowson, Box 30-21, April 1, 1960; correspondence from Ruth Bullock to Ross Dowson, Box 30-2, Nov. 16, Dec. 29, 1960; Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-3, Jan. 8, Mar. 31, 1960; correspondence between branch #1 and branch #2, Box 30-23, Mid. April 1960; correspondence from Ruth Bullock to Political Committee, Box 30-2, Nov. 23, 1960.
By early 1961 the issue of Branch #1 refusing to pursue open activity became a political difference with the decision of the majority when a national convention decided to move away from the CCF as the main area of recruitment and to launch a new independent party. The purpose of the League for Socialist Action (LSA) was to bring the New Democratic Party to a socialist program. By late 1961, Branch #1 was dissolved and members were forced to apply to Branch #2 if they wished to belong to the Canadian section of the Fourth International. The LSA continued to function as an independent party throughout the 1960s.69

Throughout the 1940s and 50s, Trotskyists considered themselves the revolutionary vanguard. They believed that they would remain small until the objective conditions were such that the mass of Canadian workers could be drawn through political struggle and education to their program. Trotskyists also had rigorous entrance requirements. Only those who agreed to the political program, and would work with the democratic centralist method as well as maintain a high level of daily political activity were welcome. The Canadian Section of the Fourth International constituted no more than one hundred people throughout the 1940s and 50s and thus any individual within it exerted more influence than they might have in a larger organization.

In its organizing methods and structure the Trotskyist movement placed an emphasis on avoiding bureaucracy and ensuring democracy. Democratic centralism, which called for constant political education and the careful integration of new leadership to ensure a critical and independent membership, sketched a process through which all comrades were able to enter into the formation of political policy and have access to political leadership. It was not an insurance against bureaucratization because it had to be applied

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69 UBCA, Bullock collection, correspondence from Ross Dowson for Political Committee to Vancouver branch #1, Box 30-21, Mar. 20, June 15, 1961; correspondence Ross Dowson to Ruth Bullock, Box 30-13, Nov. 24, 1961; circular by Peter Stevens, Box 20-15, Aug. 10, 1958; The Workers Vanguard, April 1959, p. 2 and Mid. Mar. 1960 p. 1; What the League for Socialist Action is and What it Stands For by Ruth Bullock, Ross Dowson and Malcolm Bruce, Box 20-1, June 1961.
dialectically in constantly developing contexts, however it did encourage an active and critical membership. A high level of literacy was required to fully participate.

In the Canadian context, the method was not always put into practice in the spirit in which it had been devised, and at times it appears as if it nurtured a group of hair splitters and complainers. Additionally an authoritarian leader, Ross Dowson, survived for a long time. However, many discussion papers and involved debates were generated by comrades on tactics and political positions. It is fair to say that members in this organization were very much involved in political policy formation and had access to leadership. For those few women who had the literary skills and the time to contribute to activity in the party, there was room for informing political policy and learning leadership roles both because of the small size of the organization and because of the party's organizational process.
CHAPTER 2

The Making of a Socialist Feminist: Ruth Bullock, 1909-1944

Ruth Bullock was born Ruth Fraser in 1909 in Trout Lake, a small silver and lead mining village in the Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia. Although she was a middle child of seven, she felt she was the oldest because her two elder sisters from her mother’s first marriage were sent away to school. This marriage had ended tragically with the husband’s death in a railway accident. Ruth’s father, was her mother’s second husband. He had originally come into the area with a touring theatrical group, The Fraser Repertory Players. He was educated at Queen’s College in Kingston, Ontario and was a member of the Queen’s Own Rifles there.

After settling in Trout Lake, Fraser bought into a department store at the wrong end of a mining boom. He lost his investment. In looking for work, Fraser was forced to move his family on two separate occasions to two nearby towns. Their first move was to Beaton on the northeast arm of Upper Arrow Lake. The economy of the entire area was in a state of collapse, and the most profitable position her father could find to support the family was juggling the four jobs of postmaster, road foreman, manager of the local telephone franchise, and recorder of vital statistics.

Ruth’s formal education did not begin until she was eight. The community did not have six children of 6 years of age and above, the number needed to warrant bringing in a school teacher. Ruth was, therefore, taught at home. Ruth describes this home schooling in her own words, “...I was only five years of age [and] I had already been well rooted in Scottish Nationalist history. Both my mother and father were extremely fond of reading...and encouraging their children to read at a very early age, explaining words to them. We had heard all about Robert the Bruce and how he was inspired by the spider to try, try, try again. This was really a very strong culturing for us.” Additionally, her father had an
excellent library, including a variety of socialist literature which the children were encouraged to use, looking up all unknown words and their roots in the family’s huge Oxford Dictionary. By the time she was ten she was reading Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle and Frank Norris’ The Pit.  

Around the age of eight Ruth’s life changed in two major ways. The first change was that she began her formal schooling. The second change was her father’s untimely death in October 1917. Fraser was killed on a highway site as the result of the explosion of a roadwork’s powder magazine. Ruth’s family suffered the concomitant psychological and economic stress of this major loss.

Ruth’s mother took over her former husband’s paid positions with the exception of the road foreman. Despite real economic and emotional difficulties of survival, Ruth remembers this as a “happy time”, with all children contributing work. In 1920 the family moved to Cambourne. She states that in school correct use of the English language and grammar was stressed. Later in life Ruth would take some university courses in modern history. She also gained skills in typing, bookkeeping and shorthand.

Ruth’s mother remarried, and her third husband was a mining engineer named Cory Menhinick. The family moved next to Victoria and finally on to Saltspring Island in February, 1921 where they worked a large farm. The location where Ruth and her family had their farm was known for its beauty, “…the area of Saltspring that we lived in was surrounded with a sea full of sea trout and salmon and cod and crabs and oysters and clams. Living was really very good there.”

70 Sara Diamond, interview, p. 2. Widely read, The Jungle (Garden City New York: Doubleday and Page, 1906) shocked readers with great detail about the unhygienic and brutal working conditions in the Chicago stockyards and meat packing business. The Pit—A Story of Chicago (New York: Curtis Publishing Company, 1902) is a novel which examines the distribution and control of wheat, the “deals” and the cornering of the market by “bulls” who use the Board of Trade to build their empires. Thus, both novels outline the unfairness and ‘evils’ of capitalism.

As a young adolescent, Ruth took eagerly to her new work on the farm: "I did everything on the farm. I was the first one up always, to milk the cows. I was reasonably good in the house but I would much prefer to be out digging the garden, plowing, riding the horses, driving the sheep, looking after the pigs and chicken... We had to carry all our water, too." Occasionally Ruth cooked in logging camps for her brother and his crew and for men who came to the ranch to do shearing. Ruth’s life was not all work. There were many tennis parties and visits with some well-connected friends, artists and teachers. In matters of conduct and dress, Ruth’s mother, herself dainty and genteel, raised her daughters to be ‘feminine’. However, where physical work was concerned, Mrs. Menhinick wished her daughters to be both independent and capable. On one hand, Ruth’s mother had always been impressed with the ideas of the British Suffragists, if not with their militant action. On the other hand, she gave Ruth virtually no information about birth control, and seemed to create situations of intimacy between Ruth and male family friends so that marriage would be likely.

In 1926, when she was seventeen, Ruth decided to leave the farm to look for work. All money made by the family seemed to be going back into her stepfather’s mining ventures in the Selkirk Mountains. A friend, the local school teacher, connected her with a Mrs. Waterfall who owned a raspberry farm in the small Fraser Valley settlement of Hatzic, near Mission City and needed live-in help with her children. The position also included doing laundry, cleaning the house and cooking for the berry pickers. At the end of the season Ruth’s position ended, but her employer recommended her to another family in the area.

The second job lasted longer and was even more demanding. An older woman, Mrs. Hobson was managing a huge farm for her son and needed a housekeeper. Ruth’s tasks were to do all cooking including preparing meals for harvest and pig-killing gangs, all

72 Ibid, p. 7.
washing and indoor work as well as helping in the large English flower garden. For the next two years Ruth also gave Mrs. Hobson personal care for a recurrent bowel disorder. Personal laundry was done by hand, "...I washed out on the scrubbing board and wrung with my hands, without a mangle, her big linen sheets which were edged in crochet work."\(^{73}\) Despite being on duty twenty four hours a day, Ruth enjoyed the responsibility. She felt she was earning magnificent wages at twenty dollars a month. For the first time in her life she had a bedroom of her own which she apparently treasured highly.

In 1927, Ruth met Ed Matthews, a friend of her first employer, Mrs. Waterfall. Matthews, a mechanic was seventeen years older. Despite the difference in their ages, Ruth and Ed shared an interest in good music, books and outdoor activities such as horseback riding, hiking and fishing. Against her family’s advice, Ruth who was twenty, married Matthews in November of 1929. Ruth assisted in running his garage in Mission by pumping gas, cleaning, answering the telephone and helping with other odd jobs. With the news of Ruth’s pregnancy three months later however, their relationship began to deteriorate. Both prospective parents were upset. Ed stated that Ruth had let him down through becoming pregnant. He stated that the baby would be totally her responsibility. Ruth was also surprised and angry since she had no workable knowledge of birth control. She had always viewed herself as very independent: "I had felt that I was rather an exceptional woman, that I could do so many things that other women...didn’t do...I had a very arrogant and unsisterly attitude to many, many of the women that I met. Not that I was unkind to them or anything but I’d surely felt superior. Well, I was going to bear this child quite by myself."\(^{74}\)

Seemingly denying the situation, Ruth continued her athletic pursuits and avoided seeing a doctor at all. Finally six weeks before giving birth she was forced to consult

\(^{73}\) Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 2.

\(^{74}\) Sara Diamond, interview, p. 13.
Dr. Eacrett when she began losing fluid after a rough bareback ride. The birth, in November 1930, proved difficult both physically as well as emotionally. Ruth had arranged to stay in the home of a friend who was a midwife, but Eacrett miscalculated the time of delivery and did not respond to the midwife’s advice on the matter. When labour began “unexpectedly”, Matthews refused to take his car out into the snow and cold. He encouraged her to walk (with assistance) all the distance to the midwife’s house. Finally, after several hours, Ruth was given ether and the baby was successfully delivered. Ruth was typically ignorant of how newborns should appear. She did not know that they often had “fur” and misshapen heads. Her newborn baby had a collapsed ankle that was kept hidden from her for the first few days. All these factors greatly increased her anxiety that something was “awfully wrong”. The fact that the baby was a girl did help the bonding process however: “I had hated carrying her. I had just detested the idea. I didn’t like a thing about it,...’til I realized I’d borne a little woman, and believe me, what a flood of feeling when you look down at this little woman. You realize that she’s not going to go through the sort of thing you’ve gone through.”75 Ruth’s very personal experience with the problems of childbirth would motivate her work on the issues of birth control and abortion for many years.

After the birth of daughter, Ruth struggled to manage the household on twenty dollars a month. Such costs included providing food, electricity and a telephone; Ruth sometimes went hungry. Isolated and knowing that she had made a mistake in marrying Matthews, Ruth could not at that time find support for her dilemma. Her mother, while recognizing the right of women to divorce in extreme cases, advised, “Well, we didn’t really want you to marry someone seventeen years older than yourself, but you made your bed now don’t you think you’d better lie in it?”76

75 Ibid, p. 16.
76 Ibid, p. 18.
Ruth continued to work at home and in her husband’s garage. With the worsening economic conditions in the 1930s, Ruth needed more cash. She added home-gardening, berry-picking, wool-carding, quilt-making and knitting to her existing responsibilities. She also completed a bookkeeping course, and then took in typing and bookkeeping. Despite full workdays, Ruth’s social concerns coalesced around two major themes: helping women have access to birth control and abortion, and organizing for the fledgling Cooperative Commonwealth Federation.

There were a number of factors in Ruth’s background which encouraged her to seek political solutions to perceived problems. Her parents were political in that they read, talked about, and related to the issues of the day on the basis of their political beliefs. The ideas that Ruth was exposed to in her early life were somewhat eclectic: her father’s utopian socialist positions, her mother’s admiration of the suffragettes, her stepuncle’s interest in the ideas of Annie Bezant and Madame Blavatsky and her family’s association with the Anglican Church. From this mixture Ruth sorted out what she thought was worthwhile, and what was to be rejected. As a young teenager, Ruth was moved by novels calling for social justice:

I had read The Jungle. When she found me weeping uncontrollably over the conditions of these farmers who were brought in to work in the meat packing industry in Chicago, my mother said to me...“Well never mind, dear, they’re only foreigners.” But it made me think more and more about how people earned their livings and...what appalling straits...what anti-social situations that people were put to.  

In contrast to her family Ruth did not embrace the ideas of the Anglican Church. Although she had been baptized and confirmed, and had joined the Anglican Auxiliary to please her husband, she was critical of the catechism which stated that one should not be rebellious, but content to stay in the position to which one has been called by God. On reading church history, Ruth also discovered that the church had been against the education

of women because it might lead to discontent with their social roles. To a thoughtful independent young woman this was anathema. As she grew up, Ruth was an inveterate reader and made her way through much of the pacifist literature current at the time.

Ruth did not learn any specific way to control reproduction until after the birth of her child, when she was "...constantly looking for ways of solving this question..." The midwife who delivered her child gave her a few facts, but advised Ruth to talk to her physician. Dr. Eacrett was extremely reluctant to give out any information. He lectured Ruth that she had only had one child and was a strong healthy young woman. She had a duty to produce at least four more. She finally convinced him to fit her with a pessary, extremely expensive in 1931, at $16.50.  

Eventually, Ruth became known within a limited working class social circle for her practical knowledge of birth control. Ruth also knew a few middle class women who were open to discussions, notably women teachers who may have been sympathetic because they knew that if they became pregnant they would be fired. Ruth was at that time a member of two groups: the Francis Willard prohibitionist group and the Women's Institute. In the early 1930s, women in both associations were open to discussing familiar birth control methods. These methods included: vinegar and sponges, "peeing hard", vinegar and soda douches, a sliver of soap in the vagina and withdrawal. Ruth spoke in living rooms, and one-to-one with women after meetings. The women she knew were active in working to control their reproduction and were known as "calendar watchers". Even the rhythm method was considered "uppity" at the time.  

Ruth came to believe that the churches, together with the medical profession, were dominated by males who conspired against the dissemination of birth control information. Ruth herself drew no distinctions among religious groups: "Most women were very much

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78 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 3; Heather McLeod, interview with Ruth Bullock, April 15, 1988, transcript p. 2; Sara Diamond, interview, p. 18.

79 Heather McLeod, interview 1988, pp. 3,4,11,12.
held by the rules of the United Church and the Church of England and the Catholic Church you know. Because all these Judeo-Christian outfits were totally opposed to women having any information. They didn’t mind the men knowing about French safes...but the information was not supposed to get through to women!” Ruth rejected her membership in the Church of England in part because in the 1930s the church took a position against birth control. She affirmed: “These men were saying that women must not have the right to control procreation because it makes them [the women] uncontrollable.”

Ruth believed that doctors generally acted in a paternal manner and wanted to retain control over women as well as maintain a good source of income. They were in a “god-like” position. However, at this time it was not uncommon for a doctor to decide that a woman’s “womb needed scraping” which was in fact an early abortion.

Through the CCF, which Ruth had joined in the early 1930s, she met Vivian Dowding. Dowding brought with her the birth control ideas of Margaret Sanger and the knowledge of the Kaufmann Rubber Company in Kitchener, Ontario. Ruth passed around amongst her groups the price list and address for such items as foam and diaphragm at one dollar and fifty cents, pessary cap, rubber sponge and spermicide and condoms at fifty cents each. Women would send their own orders privately because of the danger of being caught by the law. Ruth kept track of the extreme reaction to Dowding’s message in different parts of the province: “She [Dowding] was run out of towns by the doctors and the police for talking with married women—not with single women, not with high school girls, but with married women—about the control of their productive lives! And it was really shocking!” Ruth also noted the activities of Dorothea Palmer in Ontario.


81 Heather McLeod, interview 1988, p. 2.

82 Ibid, pp. 1-3; Ruth’s information varies with Dowding’s own reminiscences. Dowding has recalled in oral interviews with Sara Diamond, Women’s Labour History Project, SFU Archives — Vivian Dowding tape, and with Mary Bishop, “Vivian Dowding”, p. 80, that she had little trouble with the law in her
When she came into Vancouver Ruth was taken to luncheon meetings by women such as Mildred Osterhout Farhni and Evelyn Lesoir whom she met through women’s groups associated with the CCF: “...they were interested in me and I liked them and Laura Jamieson also. And I would be invited to the University Women’s Club luncheons,...and of course there one has a much broader perspective, could talk with so many women... about the condition of women, about how certain things are done...”. The University Women’s Club tended to be dominated by progressives: CCFer’s and women close to the Communist Party. It was here that Ruth gained some of her information and made connections with sympathetic doctors. Ruth thought that many women in the CCF over the years quietly spread information on birth control and abortion at no cost. Resolutions in the CCF called for birth control clinics and information but shied away from the issue of abortion.83

Because of the economic circumstances of the 1930s, there was a real demand for birth control which Ruth tried to meet. However, at that time she was fearful of the legal repercussions of being connected to abortions. As noted, she had a poor relationship with her husband who might move to take her child away if there were any further problems. During World War II, Ruth found that women wanted to control their fertility just as much or more because they now worked outside of their homes. Birth control devices became more widely available in drug stores in the war and postwar period, a time when Ruth continued to act as an advocate for birth-control education in the various women’s groups to which she belonged. She also became active making connections to procure abortions.84

Ruth theorized why birth control and abortion restrictions eased during war years:

...when you get large concentrations of men together in the army there has to be some kind...of sexual release for them...not alone they’d


84 Heather McLeod, interview 1988, p. 9.
want the brothels that are provided, but also the younger women who are in the general area of these army encampments are going to find themselves many times pregnant when they don't want to be...and when they're no longer going to be useful to the army if they are...so the army and the police tend to change things around ... I'm quite sure it was quite coolly figured out... so everything was relaxed to quite a degree on the question of information—at least in the urban centres.85

To obtain abortions for friends and acquaintances in the 1940s, Ruth contacted nurses that she knew who operated in their own homes. Most of her work was with these women who charged from one hundred and twenty to one hundred and fifty dollars. However, she thought that some contacts were dangerous. Ruth was put in contact with a doctor in Vancouver who was located at the corner of Georgia and Granville above the old Birks store. This doctor was on the medical registry and used his own name. He performed “Dilation and Curettage” for one hundred and fifty to three hundred and fifty dollars in his office. However, after he performed the actual D. and C., this doctor refused to have anything more to do with the woman.86

Ruth found that the most trustworthy contact was “Nurse Adelle’s Reducing Salon” in Vancouver run by Dr. Blockberger at the top of the Ford building at Hastings and Main. The price of an abortion was around seventy five dollars. Two methods were used. If an early abortion could be induced by drugs this was attempted, while after two months an operation was necessary. The clinic had hospital beds in cubicles, and women could return if there were later complications. Afterwards a nurse could be sent to the woman’s home rather than have the patient go to a hospital emergency ward. Contraception information and devices were also freely available. Ruth explained: “Dr. Blockberger was a very fine Jewish doctor...and he didn’t run it [the Salon] to make a great deal of money, and I presume because he charged so little that he probably wasn’t paying much in the way of

85 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, pp. 4,6.
protection money. It was a service that was particularly reserved for an aspect in society that they knew would need it, very much the army and the police."87

Since Ruth was a go-between, she did not meet abortionists face to face, know their names or generally know their addresses. She would get a phone number, and then she would use a certain expression or name as a password. The abortionist would generally not know her name either. Only Dr. Blockberger’s office was more open. She would talk to him using her name or a family name, “Lovat” to give information on a certain person. Patients were told to go to a certain area, and then would be picked up and taken elsewhere.88

It was mostly young wives with children who contacted Ruth, many of whom worked in the war industries. Sisters or cousins in rural areas relied on women living in the urban centres to send information. Some women came from the north. Many had already tried without success the well known techniques of gin and hot baths, or the insertion of slippery elm bark into the uterus before seeking help.89

Ruth was well aware of the dangers this work: everything had to be kept very secret. Little was said to husbands about abortions. She believed that her family might have understood her justification for spreading birth control information if they had known, but was sure they would be dismayed if she were caught helping procure abortions. In addition, as a left-winger within the CCF, she felt her credibility would be damaged with some members if she was known to be associated with abortionists. After the war, when she was involved in the Trotskyist movement, Ruth was not active in clinics or organizations. This was in part because she had to avoid illegal activity which might have given the authorities reason to move against the political party. Ruth had a strong

87 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, pp. 8-9.
88 Heather McLeod, interview 1988, pp. 6,9.
motivation to provide contraceptive and abortion information. She believed it “unfair” that men could enjoy recreational sex while women could not. Discussion of recreational sex at that time was hushed up, and was only referred to in dirty jokes. The middle class could go to doctors, but working class women did not have the funds for visits to their physicians for information. Thus sex for them was less likely to be an enjoyable activity.\textsuperscript{90} Ruth saw the problem as part of “the woman’s question”. She considered that the issues of birth control and abortion were a private part of women’s oppression in capitalist society, and that she could offer some aid.

In the back of a hand-written recipe book, Ruth kept notes on contraception and abortion issues throughout the 1930s, and quoted from Margaret Sanger, the well known American birth control advocate. Ruth noted: “war exists as a substitute for adequate birth control, birth control was legal in Europe, and a Vancouver birth control clinic was established in 1932”. She quoted section 207c of the Criminal Code which outlawed birth control, and questioned some of the wording. Finally, she added that there was a proviso that if the public good was served, then a conviction was not in order. She wrote tartly:

Should the family physician be consulted about contraceptives? With tonsillectomy not the popular fad it was, the G.P. must be provided with some easy means of support! And what easier victims could one have to a graft than desperate men and women?\textsuperscript{91}

She formulated her own questions about birth control and religion, “Do people marry for the express purpose of having a family through which to glorify God? Should they?” and “The rhythm method of birth control is approved by some Roman Catholic authorities. If one method, why not another?” She quoted George Bernard Shaw about the state’s responsibility for children, especially since the state often made life and death demands upon its citizens. She noted that there were: “1,600,000 abortions in the U.S.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, pp. 7,10-12.

\textsuperscript{91} Ruth’s recipe book, 1930-1939--her possession.
each year. A racket. Why are only women—the victims—mentioned? Many single men are hauled into court—does marriage absolve a man of all responsibility? And on the tombstones of these women—‘Beloved’—etc.—!”

Ruth neatly summarized the main ideas in Malthus’ 1798 Essay on Population on one page, and drew a graph showing the curve of decreasing food supply being crossed by the curve of increasing population. By Malthus’ definition, she thus proved there was a surplus population. She labelled the diagram, “China” and noted that Malthus’ conclusions included late marriage and moral restraint.

Based on her notes, Ruth wrote an essay found in the same document in which she first laid out why birth control should be available. She then refuted different religious opposition arguments, and drew some conclusions. As a rare document of ‘rank and file’ attitudes among socialist women at the time it is worth examining at some length. Ruth marshalled two main arguments as to why birth control was necessary. The first is based on Malthus’ idea of surplus population and is an excellent example of the economist bias of socialist feminism in the 30s: “How can workers organize unions, or obtain higher wages, if the supply of labour is constantly excessive relative to the demands of the labour market? Every child a laborer puts on that market is potentially a weapon against labour’s cause.”

To build her case that a surplus working population currently existed, Ruth added that the birthrate among those on relief was sixty percent higher than that of others, and observed that a cycle of “low standards” resulted in the poor having larger families.

Ruth’s second argument for birth control was, “Defectives in so many cases outbreed normal people—surely the quality of the citizenry is of first concern.” However, she quickly followed that with an observation that if the state can control the legality of birth control, then might it not try to stop the birth of subnormal people by legalized and

\[92\text{ Ibid}\]
\[93\text{ Ibid}\]
compulsory sterilization? Ruth felt that this attitude is wrong because ultimately neither church nor state should control individual liberty on such issues: "In these matters the authority for one's conduct is in oneself, in conscience. Each must work out his own life with respect for the personality of self and others."94

Having backed away from a eugenist position because of her abhorrence of state intervention in these personal concerns, Ruth went on to refute some religious propositions against birth control. Firstly, it was sometimes argued that birth control violated the sacredness of marriage whose prime purpose was procreation. She countered this with her own ideas of marriage and some apt questions: "This [idea of procreation] is absurd for what marriage has as its first and sole purpose childbearing? People marry generally because they love one another and wish to make their relationship more complete and permanent and realize themselves in one another. Indeed shall we say of a childless marriage that it has been a failure or is incapable of spiritual qualities? And where people deliberately limit their family to two or three children shall we judge that their family life is less ethical than that of those whose families are of eight or ten?"

She also dismissed the theology which "deduces that all the millions of unborn souls must be born in order to be baptized and saved." This she thought was not an argument which would justify church authority on such a subject. She dealt with the Roman Catholic Church's position on the rhythm method of birth control and questioned its premises. "At this point the Roman Catholic Church shifts its ground and admits that family limitation is not sinful but the method used must be "natural". What is natural? Man in a sense has been against nature all his days. In wearing clothes, living in heated houses,

94 Many progressive people in the 1930s held eugenist ideas and asked why "damaged" babies should be kept alive. Ruth believed in the sterilization of the unfit in the late 1930s, but changed her mind when she saw the implications of these ideas in the fascist movement in Europe and during the war. She took a stand against the belief in eliminating "less than complete people". She argued that many "damaged" people have talents. If the workers were currently supporting the bourgeoisie who demand so much, then why could a few from "underneath" society not be supported? A woman in the CCF, Muriel McLeod convinced both she and her second husband, Reg Bullock that "retarded" children could be taught. Heather McLeod, interview 1988, p. 10.
flying, man is, in a sense, fighting with nature.” She noted that the church had used the same arguments against the adoption of anaesthetics in childbirth in the past. Every “advance of science” was combatted with the slogan, “unnatural”. Ruth argued, “If any birth control is right, then the best methods known to science should be used and made available to all who need them.” She concluded that to say “flesh is evil” and that sexual expression should be countered with strict moral restraint would result in a divided self. With a hint that Freudian concepts had become well accepted she wrote: “…undue repression of natural human forces laden with good causes much harm to oneself and to those at whose expense one compensates.” In contrast she believed that the “full life” was the development of all parts of the self. Initially Ruth noted that a response to the claim that the availability of birth control would lead to “gluttony and adultery...licence and abuse”, was not necessary. She later stated that such beliefs were not unreasonable. Her final conclusion was that self restraint would always be needed. She did, however, question whether people should be “made good through being kept ‘innocent’ in the sense of ignorant.”

When the CCF formed in 1933 Ruth felt “... a strong warm feeling towards it.” She was open to new ideas: “...part of my impetus to join the CCF in 1934 was that I wanted information, ...that I felt was available both on how life could be lived and how women’s position in society could be changed.” Apart from the ideological roots of Ruth’s move toward socialism, there were some very harsh local and national economic conditions which facilitated the CCF’s growth in Mission and her involvement in that growth. Unemployment was widespread and relief rates were extremely low. Local people were turning to home production for consumption and additional income, and there was little in the way of recreation or entertainment. In addition, many local people had come from England via Saskatchewan and brought Labour Party ideas with them. Thus, “...it was
one of those wildfire things... when we heard of an organization like the CCF we joined it in large numbers.”

Ruth was attracted to the CCF because of their beliefs as stated in the Regina Manifesto. The manifesto declared that it was necessary to eradicate capitalism. With the demise of capitalism, war would also cease to be a danger. Ruth was also attracted by the party’s reputation of accepting independent-minded women. As she recalls party members believed: “...that men and women were created equal and should be considered equal,” although the CCF definitely accepted the role of women in the family. Some of the women who were active in the party were especially interesting to her, including Helena Gutteridge, Laura Jamieson and Mildred Osterhout Farhni. Although the CCF did not as a party work on the issue of birth control, many female members did have connections and knowledge of how to offer aid. Ruth had already met some of these women and shared information with them at the University Women’s Club in Vancouver.

Almost immediately, Ruth took on executive positions in the Mission CCF group. At various times from 1935 to 1943, she was club treasurer and secretary and was active in many of the door-to-door collection drives which were essential to sustain the party’s finances.

Since she lived in the mixed farming, small-scale manufacturing area of Mission, Ruth was not directly involved in the Vancouver union struggles of the 1930s. However like many other women, she fed the unemployed when they went through her area, and collected and sent homebaked food to the men who were involved in actions such as the occupation of the Post Office.

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95 Ibid, p. 20; Sara Diamond, interview, pp. 20, 22.

96 Sara Diamond, interview, p. 23; For the Regina Manifesto of 1933 see Michael S.Cross, The Decline and Fall of a Good Idea, CCF-NDP Manifestoes (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1974), pp. 19-23. The only reference to rectifying discrimination against women is found in section 7 “The Labor Code”, which calls for “...equal reward and equal opportunity of advancement for equal services, irrespective of sex...”.
Ruth took a job sorting vegetables and fruit at the local canning factory early in World War II. In order to keep an eye out for their daughter she worked the night shift, while her husband worked days in his garage. Having read about socialized production and industrial action Ruth was interested to experience it: “I had read the *Flivver King*...about Henry Ford’s speed-up and the ingenuity of it, but that was the first time I had experienced it...the boss would...step over and twist the machine so that it went just a little bit faster and then a little bit faster again.” But sometimes the workers resisted. This reaction elated Ruth:

...the word was just passed from a woman who was a Forewoman...the word would go from one belt line to the next,...‘Let them go, let them go, let them go,’ and we knew that meant just refuse to sort at this speed, that the pressure wasn’t going to come on us in that fashion...and they went in the big bean bins and they had to take them back and put them through all over again...there was virtually nothing they could do about it.97

Additionally, workers sensed that management emphasized their disdain for working people by directing that choice vegetables were canned whole for the officers, while everything else was chopped up for the ordinary troops.

As Ruth’s involvement in political and social concerns deepened, her husband became more conservative and angry about her activities. He came from a very “proper” English family. He valued his family’s crest and had been sent to private schools. Although he had challenged this training by becoming a mechanic, he had not substantially altered his political views. Because of their increasingly divergent views, he and Ruth would often have virtually no conversation.

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97 Sara Diamond, interview, pp. 30-31; For a visual interview with Ruth Bullock describing speed-up and resistance on the vegetable canning assembly line see Sara Diamond, “The Lull Before the Storm”, part of “Keeping the Home Fires Burning” Women’s Labour Research Committee, available through Women in Focus. Upton Sinclair’s *The Flivver King, a Story of Ford-America* (Pasadena: Upton Sinclair, 1937) described working conditions on assembly lines and was used widely by the United Automobile Workers of America to propagandize for union recognition.
It was at a CCF nominating convention in her Fraser Valley constituency in 1938 that Ruth first met Reg Bullock with whom she would form a lifelong emotional and political relationship. He was a boilermaker by trade, had been associated with the left of the CCF in the Stanley Park Club branch and was, at that time, a provincial organizer for the CCF: "And I was immediately very greatly attracted to him...and he...maintained the contact by writing me notes you know, and he would see me at riding constituency meetings ...But we didn't get together for five years." At the beginning of 1943, Ruth left her husband everything in their house in Mission, and took her daughter to live with Reg. Her husband took legal action to gain child custody but was unsuccessful because of his "very ugly attitudes towards sex." On the other hand, since Ruth was "living in sin, not in an honorable estate" the court placed the girl in the legal custody of the Superintendent of Child Welfare, although she could continue to live with her mother. This meant that the daughter could be visited by social welfare workers to check on the home environment. Ruth had to act the role of a model mother or face having her daughter taken away.  

Ruth felt that she faced some discrimination in the CCF because she was living with, but not married to, Reg. After her divorce from Matthews they married in 1945 ostensibly to save money on income tax. Their marriage also eased feelings with their families, and smoothed their work in the CCF. The new living arrangement and relationship was a deeply satisfying one for Ruth: "...we enjoyed one another tremendously, we had some gay old romps you know. But we did both of us enjoy writing, thinking, reading, had some good old fights about politics too. That was one thing we fought about, we didn’t fight about money, we didn’t fight about ...anything along the usual lines, but we certainly had some struggles over political differences from time to time." Much of their political work in the CCF and later in the Trotskyist groupings was jointly done. Both Ruth and Reg helped produce The Flame, a paper put out by the

98 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 6; Sara Diamond, interview, pp. 33-34.
CCF’s left-wing North Shore Club in the 1940s and the 1950s. Other joint efforts included spending holidays together each year at the American Trotskyist-run West Coast Vacation Schools outside of Los Angeles. The two shared a common political analysis and practice, and Reg was generally supportive of Ruth’s independence. However, he was not consistent on the question of women in political life: “...my own dear Reg ...would stand over me and he would shriek at me and tell me that the reason that women shouldn’t be in politics was because they were so emotional...And I would say to him ‘But Reg, who’s being emotional?’ He couldn’t see the picture of himself.”

As well as being a skilled tradesman, an active trade unionist, and a CCFer, Reg wrote poetry and prose. He was also an accomplished political cartoonist. He had very high expectations of himself, and while he accepted Ruth’s autonomy, he wanted her to play the role of helpmate. Whenever Ruth got a job, Reg would seem to take sick: “Every time Reggie would have something like a little stroke or something. It put him under such stress.... he couldn’t stand the idea of not coming home. See when I worked we would stop and have a meal in a cafe downtown...instead of...coming home and having me have the coffee ready, his paper there and an hour and a half with the paper and conversation...he didn’t have that lovely let-down when he got home...But he had sort of convulsive attacks which wasn’t funny at all.” Although on looking back Ruth found, “...no woman today would have tolerated the sentiments in those poems” Reg could sometimes, when challenged, admit he was wrong on certain points.

Ruth and Reg built their own home in North Vancouver in the late 40s and early 1950s. Because Reg had a bad back, Ruth did much of the heavy labour such as digging and laying stones. Trotskyist ideologist Ross Dowson considered them “petit bourgeois” for building this house, which is very much a ‘workingman’s cottage’, showing a variety


100 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, pp. 13-14, 33.
of aesthetic sensibilities.\textsuperscript{101} Ruth has kept the house well into her 80s. Reg Bullock continued in his political activities until 1979 when he died of a heart attack.

In 1943, Ruth joined the North Vancouver CCF club where she remained active throughout the 1940s and 50s except for a brief period when the Trotskyists resigned from the CCF to set up an independent party. Her roles and activities within the club included helping produce \textit{The Flame}, acting as organizer, club secretary, secretary of the women's council, federal riding secretary, social convener and as campaign manager for a candidate named Hugh Clifford in a 1957 election. Her interest in the stage also found an outlet in amateur theatre productions.

While there were some articulate and involved female activists in the CCF, Ruth believed that the division of labour within the party often followed gender lines with women doing support work and men doing "political" tasks. As a result many women did not play an active role in policy formation: "Some of the women could be counted on to...take convention delegateships, go to conventions and put up their voting card at the right points. A lot of the women in the CCF were very ignorant politically. They were against the system, they were against people being hungry and unhappy, but they really didn't know what it was about."\textsuperscript{102}

Significantly, Ruth was labelled as a "Trotskyite" by others before she even knew what the term meant. In her work in the CCF Ruth knew Communist Party members, and was not impressed with how rudely they treated one man who was thought to be a "Trotskyite". Thus when the Communists approached her to join their party, she refused:

\[\ldots\text{although I'd had a number of very good social contacts with members of the Communist Party I was attacked after that as a Trotskyite and I really didn't know what they were talking about. Because the only knowledge I had of Trotsky was that little article in}\]

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, p. 18.

\textsuperscript{102} Sara Diamond, interview, pp. 46-47.
the...5¢ Liberty Magazine on...what would happen to the American working class after the revolution.103

The stance taken early in WWII by the majority of the CCF to assist the war effort by providing economic aid, and their decision during the conscription crisis to favour MacKenzie King’s “conscription if necessary but not necessarily conscription” position left Ruth somewhat confused. In part it had been the CCF’s views on pacifism which originally attracted her to join the federation. The Communists’ switch from early opposition to the war to later all out support for the allied cause, also prompted her to add extra readings to her on-going study of Marxism.104

Ruth and Reg believed that the actions of the Communist Party did nothing to advance the working class. In fact Reg considered that war bonds were another tax on working people and refused to buy. They argued that Lenin’s teachings suggested: “...you don’t struggle against...capitalist parties in other countries, you struggle against the capitalist party in your own country and that is the way to defeat it.” They were sure that the war would lead to an international defeat of the working class. Although he had not previously been a member of the Canadian movement, Reg was close to some Trotskyist positions.105

In 1944, Ross Dowson came to Vancouver and called a meeting to reconstitute the Trotskyist forces. Although he and his brother Murray were still in the Canadian Army,


104 Ruth’s steady reading of marxist and feminist works had earlier been guided by a Mrs. Houlder, a librarian at the Carnegie library in Mission. In 1993 Ruth recalled that it was through such self-study over several years during the 1930s and early 40s, that she moved towards a revolutionary perspective, that is, the “building up a greater social consciousness and understanding of how the world turned”. Conversation with author, March 1993.

105 Sara Diamond, interview, pp. 35-37.
they were able to do some effective organizing. Ruth remembers: "...we had quite a
gathering up on Main street at a place called Doc Campbell's...Really I wouldn't have been
invited I'm sure except that I was living with Reg at the time....He'd been around the
Stanley Park CCF club and he had a reputation for being a Trotskyist which he hadn't
exactly earned. It was because he'd been charged with being a "Trotskyite" by the Stalinist
people..." This club had retained a strong tradition of critical revolutionary thought; its
members were left-wingers who were neither sympathetic to Stalin's form of communism
in the USSR nor to the theory of socialism in one country. For years, they had held
Sunday night forums, and Ruth and Reg both conducted study classes for the group.106

The people whom Dowson gathered held the idea that after the war there would be
great potential for social change. The working class might be defeated, the Stalinists might
stage a "bureaucratic revolution", or a more truly revolutionary change might be brought
about. A meeting was held in Montreal in 1944 to bring together the Trotskyist forces.
Ruth and Reg both joined the Trotskyist movement in 1944 to build an organization that
they hoped would make revolutionary change more likely.107

At the same time, Ruth and Reg continued their work in the CCF. This work was
now an "intervention", that is work assigned by and considered important to the building of
a Trotskyist party. Their purpose was to work with left-wingers to build a revolutionary
current. They were active in the North Shore CCF club, while many of the rest of the
Vancouver Trotskyists belonged to the Little Mountain CCF and Stanley Park CCF
clubs.108

106 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 10; For CCF clubs see Jack Scott, A Communist Life.
107 Sara Diamond, interview, p. 37, Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 11.
108 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 7; An official letter from the CCF provincial executive outlines
Ruth's status as a former member seeking to regain membership when the RWP decided to send its
members back into the CCF. This followed a period when the RWP functioned as an independent party
from 1946 to 1951. UBCA, Bullock collection, correspondence, Box 30-7, July 31, 1952; Ruth had the
minute books of the North shore club from the mid 30s and the late 50s in her personal possession in
1984.
Childhood education and family influences, along with observations and experiences of the economic and social conditions of the 1930s had led Ruth towards a socialist analysis of society and her practice in the grass roots of the CCF had nurtured her socialist politics. Part of the reason she joined the early CCF was to ascertain how women's position in society could be changed through a different political party. In the federation she observed the typical sexual division of labour, where women often did the non-questioning and non-theoretical tasks. Within unofficial political and or progressive circles of women, Ruth was active; she frequently theorized about the rights of women to control their reproductive capacities. From these experiences she developed a gender analysis.

With World War II, Ruth reconsidered her estimation of the CCF. The party's position on the war differed with her earlier pacifist beliefs, and as she read more of Marx and Lenin's works, she became convinced that the CCF was moving away from the needs of the working class. The Trotskyist Movement took a revolutionary approach to socialism, while by definition it was against the bureaucratic control by the top leadership that was practised in the Communist Party, which had been reborn as the Labour Progressive Party in 1943. The democratic centralist method used by Trotskyists seemed to insure that grass-roots members and women would have a voice in political policy. Thus, when Ruth joined this more intense and revolutionary milieu in 1944, she was pursuing both her socialist and gender politics.
CHAPTER 3

“The Woman Question” and Canadian Trotskyism, 1945-1960

Ruth Bullock believed that overall Trotsky had shown a depth of understanding of the position of women in society as a whole that was not shared by Lenin. In the post war period and into the 1950s, the “feminine mystique” reigned as the cultural goal for women in North America and dictated that a woman’s most important goal was fulfilment of her femininity through motherhood and homemaking.109 Given this conservative context, it was notable that Trotsky’s perspectives on the “woman question” lived on and were debated within the Fourth International. His ideas, the party’s internal and external initiatives and disputes, their press coverage and debates reveal that like other Marxist currents, Canadian Trotskyists confronted the “woman question”. Their efforts met with varied success but it was their particular brand of democratic centralism in a tiny group which allowed women significant influence on party policy and a method by which they could enter leadership positions.

Trotskyists subscribed to the traditional Marxist formulation that women’s oppression was rooted in capitalism, thus until the social system was overturned women would never be free and that the measure of society was revealed by the situation of women. Trotsky, writing in the 1920s about the USSR, believed that women’s specific enslavement was rooted in traditional families which were “...nests of medievalism, female slavery and hysteria, daily humiliation of children, feminine and childish superstition.” Thus women would not be free until the traditional family was destroyed. By 1933 he alleged: “If one understands by “family” a compulsory union based on the marriage

contract, the blessing of the church, property rights, and the single passport, then Bolshevism has destroyed this policed family from the roots up.\textsuperscript{110}

The solution was to replace the family through the socialization of family functions; communal childcare, kitchens and laundries, all of which required that society be able to provide a sufficient material base as well as the social will to educate people to a higher cultural level. A legislative framework protecting women was only a starting point. Small model experiments in communal housekeeping could point the way because the state, in the 1920s did not yet have the resources to provide what was needed. Since women were the most oppressed by the family, Trotsky characterized them as the “moral bettering ram” which would crack the “shell” of old prejudices, although all Communists were obliged to support them. The result would be liberation for women as well as growth of the human personality and an increase in stable relationships.\textsuperscript{111}

Trotsky wrote articles on the “woman question” from 1923-1936 which reflected his changing views of the Soviet Union and his increasing disgust with the Stalinist ruling clique. He claimed the October revolution had done all it could in political, legal, economic and cultural efforts but the state had been too poor to provide the material base for change. In his final work on the topic, “Thermidor in the Family” written in 1936, he detailed the regression in women’s rights in the USSR and pointed to their return to the drudgery and isolation of the home.\textsuperscript{112}

Just as in the USSR, in the Canadian section of the Trotskyist movement after WWII, theory often differed from the reality of practice. The movement was small and there were few women. Ruth remembers that there was disinterest in the oppression of

\textsuperscript{110} Leon Trotsky, \textit{Women and the Family} (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974), pp. 52, 62. This work is a collection of writings by Trotsky on topics relating to women written over a 13 year period, from when he held high rank in the Soviet government in the 1920s, through his leadership in the Left Opposition until his exile in Europe in the 30s.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, p. 43.

women, and a strict gender definition of what was political work and who was to do it. The general consensus was that: "...women's place is in the home...It was up to the women to be the helpmates of men and to make things easier, to release men to do these things." Despite this attitude female members worked to organize unions, to fight high prices in consumer groups and union auxiliaries, and wrote for the party newspaper on issues pertinent to women.113

One such revolutionary journalist was Bunny Hunter, a history professor who wrote a column under the name 'Mary Wood' in Labour Challenge from May 1947 to October 1949 on a variety of topics pertaining to women. After Hunter, another member, Ruth Houle wrote as 'Wood' for a period. An examination of 'Wood's' writing is crucial in determining how the Trotskyists handled the woman question during this period. 'Wood's' column was not aimed particularly at women in the home; there were no recipes, fashion tips or child care advice. This was in contrast to the "The Daily Round" a women's column in the LPP's Pacific Tribune which was oriented to housewives offering tips mixed in with calls to social action.114 'Wood's' analysis was that "...not only poverty, not only written laws, but the entire tradition and education of women from our earliest school days, are used to keep us twice-enslaved, once as working people, again as overburdened housewives." Reminding women in March 1948 that they had only their chains to lose, she envisioned revolutionary women, "Wide awake, fighting for the socialist future in every struggle of the working class, we can and we will make our dream of freedom come true." 'Wood' never diluted her radicalism and was always serious, hard-hitting and revolutionary. She always wrote about socio-political issues. There were no compromises with other groups, not even the CCF which she lambasted occasionally.


Nor were there compromises with maternal feminist ideology. Maternal ideology implied that women’s role as wife and mother nurtured in her a moral superiority; thus women had the responsibility to take their private roles into the public sphere. ‘Wood’ was against the pacifism of the many maternal feminists in the CCF. She saw feminists as using “sweet words”, and producing no action. Instead she insisted that there was little difference between the sexes and that women could be very militant.

The ideas ‘Wood’ advocated derived from a Marxist analysis with a focus on women. In going beyond economic issues, she ventured onto topics such as violence in the family and, had she not left the party, may have developed these ideas at greater length. However, while her work was acceptable for publication in the Trotskyist press, it did not flow from political positions passed by the party, and was not taken up officially within the movement for greater discussion or action. Nor was the party supportive of women in its internal life. Women were assigned mostly support tasks, tended to lack self-confidence and sometimes faced blatant anti-woman bias.

The SWP was more advanced on this issue, and it was within the SWP that a ‘beauty’ debate arose in the mid 1950s which challenged the assumption that no gains could be made for women under capitalism. The process of democratic centralism allowed a wide ranging debate including grass roots members and the leadership. Canadian Trotskyist women observed this discussion with interest, and throughout the 1940s and 50s their experience also demonstrates that despite the party’s piece meal approach to ‘women’s issues’ which played a secondary role to other political campaigns, it was the democratic centralist process as well as informal mentoring among women which enabled females to play a significant role in this political formation.

In the late ’40s the Vancouver branch emphasized economic issues in the work they did which related specifically to women. Some efforts were put into supporting female workers’ unionization, and women working outside the home received some press coverage. The branch also put limited resources into building organizations to fight high
prices which was a “woman’s issue” because of women’s social and economic roles as home-makers and consumers. Some RWP comrades were active in women’s auxiliaries to trade unions and worked to connect the women’s organizations against high prices with the auxiliaries. While the RWP recognized that a few members were involved in women’s auxiliaries it was not considered important enough to be termed an “intervention”.

The Vancouver branch made some attempts to organize female workers but small forces meant that their achievements were limited. After 1946 two female comrades Muriel Bradley and Elaine MacDonald, were office workers and put many hours into organizing their work places. Additionally several of the group members tried to assist Lillian Whitney in her work with the waitresses’ union. This venture was not very successful. Significantly during this period the party program did not call for equal pay for equal work although an earlier 1933 Trotskyist program had.115

However, Labour Challenge kept up the fight by describing women’s experiences with unemployment, bad working conditions and discrimination including that meted out by the government agencies and unions who were supposed to help workers. Labour Challenge always advocated equal pay and unionization. Immediately after World War II, female workers, especially those who had laboured in war industries, began to be laid off.116 A letter-to-the-editor from a “job-seeker” described being laid off and looking for work in an increasingly glutted job market, where bosses requested that workers take a cut in pay. This was suggested as an alternative to a lay-off so that businesses could remain competitive. Women faced special discrimination. Having two children to support, the writer found that the going rates for many jobs were less than half of what she had been earning in the war industry. She was critical of union organizers who told her that these


116 A cartoon in the press commented on this topic. A large over-bearing “society” woman said to her maid who is scrubbing the floor: “I’ve always said a woman’s place is in the home. Aren’t you happier here than working in that old war plant?”, Labour Challenge, Oct.1945 p. 6.
wages were “fine” and of the women at the Selective Service who asserted that she could manage because she had the aid of family allowance cheques. She noted that:

For many jobs you had to — live with your parents at home (cashier), come from a good family (typist), have attractive appearance (selling bread), be willing and obliging (housework), have at least five years experience (selling candies), be single (typist). My looks are nothing to shout about and I will never see thirty again: why should I be out of the question in a printing plant or a bakery or selling shoes... my morale is getting low, lower than my heels and my pride is wearing thinner than my winter coat.117

However, the letter writer concluded that in times like these it was even more necessary to support strikers who were leading the way in fighting for improved standards of living.

In December, 1946 a “sales girl” described the conditions of clerks working in department stores. She complained that other workers did not view this group as part of labour or allies in their cause. Also too many clerks saw themselves as a cut above other workers, and fell for the boss’s tricks of half-day holidays throughout the year only to be made up in unrecognized overtime at Christmas. They were expected to dress smartly and contribute to charity even though their wages were very low. She called for unionization of the department store clerk occupation as a remedy. Indeed equal pay and unionization were the answers to the majority of women’s work problems. An article jokingly titled “The Greedy Workers” described how office girls had gained independence as a result of higher wages and unionization.118

Of all issues relating to women, the Trotskyists spent most of their energy in this period on the issue of prices and wages. Marxism emphasizes the material base of social problems and this was an economic issue. In the few years following the war, food prices

117 Ibid, Dec. 1945, p. 7. In January 1947 the paper noted that during the war women had been drawn into industry, but they were now driven out by taxation when most still had to work to supplement their husband’s wages. In addition, women were swelling the ranks of job hunters because some husbands had been laid off, and the cost of living was rising. Mid. Jan 1947, p. 2, Mar. 1947, p. 1.

increased greatly, and as a result housewives formed organizations from coast to coast that were aimed at combating this rise in the cost of living. In Vancouver, “Housewives United” emerged. The Trotskyists believed the issue had the potential to become a large social force as economic pressures increased, and sent Ruth as a representative. She joined the North Vancouver branch which was dominated by the communists. In October 1946 the RWP passed a motion that, “Women party comrades, not otherwise directly engaged in the Trade Union field, associate themselves with ‘Housewives United’ and operate as a party faction.” In April 1947 another motion indicated that Ruth should accept nomination for office in this “mass organization”. But later in the month Ruth reported that the “Stalinists” were letting this organization die.¹¹⁹

A new organization, the “Housewives and Consumers’ Association” was growing, however. The RWP decided that female members should attend the conference on April 29 and, if the opportunity developed, accept office. By fall 1947 Ruth reported that she was a representative to the new committee whose slogan was “Buy Only Essentials”, but this group was not thriving either. The branch discussed whether she should raise the question of the “sliding scale” or escalator clause which was outlined in Trotsky’s transitional

¹¹⁹ UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, Oct 4, 1946, April 4, 1947. Although it was not listed as referring to women, the issue of defending labour’s standard of living was included in all published programs. Because of women’s role in homemaking and consumption for the family, work on this point of the program was implicitly oriented to women. Labour Challenge, “Our Program” June 1947, p. 4; There was no doubt that women were struggling to make their family budgets stretch. With articles entitled “Rising Prices Slash Wages, Subsidies Go” and “Prices Going Up Again as Ottawa Lifts More Ceilings”, Labour Challenge estimated that housewives had been faced with a fifty percent increase in the cost of living since the outbreak of the war. A large photograph of a woman with selected items of food showed the increase in food prices from 1932 to 1947 on the front page of the mid October, 1947 issue. Alongside was an article: “Living Costs still Soaring: Labour needs a Sliding Scale of Wages” which described the problems that housewives were facing. In 1947 see Mid Feb. p1, Mid May p. 2, June p. 4, Mid June p. 14, Mid Oct. 1947, p1, Mid Mar. 1948, p1; Sara Diamond, interview, p. 48.
program and called for wages to rise with increases in the cost of living. This scale would be based on a reliable index produced by the unions themselves.120

Ruth evaluated the next meeting of the North Vancouver HCA as a great success and reported that they were now demanding that margarine be made available to the consuming public and that the central Vancouver HCA unit was also going to press the matter. The campaign involved: "...distributing stickers and standing in the parking lots with our petitions and hundreds and dozens of people signed them against the high prices and for the right of the housewife to have margarine on the table to cope with the high cost of butter."121

Despite the many who signed the petitions, "...we never did become any sort of a popular mass movement of housewives." However, it was not from a lack of coverage or advice on the issue in the Trotskyist party press. Frequent articles appeared from 1946 to 1948 describing how high prices affected women as the consumers for their families, what was wrong with the strategies currently being used to protest and lower prices, and what the correct approach was to "defend labour's standard of living".122

The Trotskyists argued against the strategies which were employed by the LPP in the housewives associations and some unions to fight inflation, such as the LPP's move against milk price increases through the courts. This move was only useful sometimes, and subsidies were not the right answer, either.123 In August 1946 when the Wartime Prices and Trade Board allowed the price of beef to increase by two cents a pound, Labour

120 UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, April 19/20, 1947, Sept. 3, 1947, Sept. 10, 1947; for Trotsky on partial and transitional demands see George Novack, "The Role of the Transitional Program in the Revolutionary Process".

121 Sara Diamond, interview, p. 47; UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, Sept. 17, 1947.


Challenge asserted that the only thing that this board had ever done was to freeze wages, but that the buyers' strike called for by the various housewives' associations would not work. Because the masses had not responded, the two strikes that had recently ended in Winnipeg and Toronto were judged ineffective. Buyers' strikes were not comparable to rent strikes, and it was nonsense to tell workers to do without, when they could not even meet the cost of living. The following year 'Mary Wood' claimed that Marie Antoinette had nothing on Canadian labour leaders. When the French masses were starving, the haughty queen had advised: “Let them eat cake”, while when Canadian workers could barely feed themselves due to the high cost of food, the United Steelworker’s District Director Charles Millard had replied, “Let them stop eating.” ‘Wood’ used recent statistics from Millard’s own labour confederation (the CCL) that showed workers could not follow his advice to pursue buyers’ strikes. The average manufacturing income was $32.18 per week, while the weekly cost of living for a family of five was $38.23. She estimated that even the higher amount did not permit the comfort of a cup of coffee once a day. ‘Wood’ concluded: “We’ll bring the labour ‘Marie’s’ down to earth by union action. We’ll fight for wage increases instead of making our families suffer still more by a useless ‘buyers’ strike.”

As ‘Wood’ indicated, a rise in wages as well as the formation of mass consumers’ associations were strategies the RWP argued for. These were partial demands which Trotsky had indicated were usually appropriate to defend workers’ living standards. The election platform of a Trotskyist candidate in a Toronto municipal election in December 1947 called for the immediate formation of a committee on prices made up of delegates from factories, trade unions, Co-ops, farmers organizations, housewives and small shop owners. This committee would demand to take over the books of monopolies who continued to keep prices high and engaged in their own price fixing. Indeed the mass

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consumers' organizations that Mary Wood envisioned would: "...have to demand the power to open the books of the profiteers, to set prices, to smash any black marketeer who tries to withhold food and clothing to force prices up. That's the way to deal with our real enemies—the Big Business lords whose lackeys are in Ottawa."  

But articles in the press frequently went far beyond these strategies making transitional demands such as nationalization and expropriation under workers' control of big industries that raised the prices of important daily goods, the sliding scale of wages and calling for socialism. In "The New Touch of Midas" 'Mary Wood' decried the high price of butter caused by monopolies. She believed that workers should take over the food trusts and administer them for use, not for profit. In June 1947 the first item of the published Party program was to defend the standard of living of labouring people: "A sliding scale of wages — an escalator wage clause in all union contracts to provide automatic wage increases to meet the rising cost of living!" 'Wood' argued that since large families were hardest hit and the victims were children, mothers and families should realize the need for socialism. However, Trotsky indicated such transitional demands were to be used in situations where the masses of workers were near to the creation of an independent power. These demands were to challenge the current regime and were directed against the basic foundations of the capitalist system. The housewives and consumer organizations had not yet even attracted large numbers of activists, thus in retrospect, it is clear to this author, that as a result of calling for transitional demands, the RWP was ignoring Trotsky's admonition not to pose slogans that were far beyond the class consciousness of the masses.  

125 Labour Challenge, May 1947, p. 2, Mid. Dec. 1947 p. 1, Mid-June 1948 p. 4; Novack, "The Role of the Transitional Program in the Revolutionary Process". In the RWP's work in the MWB IU Trotskyists called for partial demands such as joining consumers groups, the unity of producers and consumer groups and demanding an investigation of price spreads and the books of the milk retailers. UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, Sept. 1946.  

While the women's consumer associations were short-lived, women's auxiliaries to trade unions traditionally organized social events and supported the largely male unions, and were another arena where revolutionaries could hope to influence working class women.\(^\text{127}\) For example the Communists sought to politicize and educate union wives in campaigns against rising prices in the Women's Auxiliary to the Marine Workers and Boiler-makers Industrial Union (MWBIU) #1, and the Women's Auxiliary of the IWA which they dominated. The LPP lay great emphasis on auxiliary work but, significantly, and despite Ruth's efforts, the Trotskyists did not apparently recognize work in women's auxiliaries as an important political intervention.

Despite this, when Reg Bullock was employed in the shipyards, Ruth was active in the Women's Auxiliary to the MWBIU #1 where she acted as secretary-treasurer and sometimes chair. She later joined the Women's Auxiliary of the IWA when Reg took a job in the wood industry. Both auxiliaries organized functions such as annual picnics and Christmas tree parties and monthly meetings, but were most active in hospital visiting to injured workers. In the forest industry, injuries were particularly high:

...We would take what we called comforts to the men in the hospitals. We would be formed into a little grouping of two or at most three to take in mail that had been sent to the union office, to take in cigarettes... and candy and magazines and...then we would take orders back from the men of what they wanted. In some instances we would communicate directly with their families on the outside, and some of us did this twice a week, but all of us did it at least once a week unless there was the impediment of small children...\(^\text{128}\)

Other members could substitute if children were sick or another emergency occurred.

Ruth used her membership in the Women's Auxiliary of the MWBIU #1 to build a campaign against the high cost of living and called upon another RWP member to


\(^{128}\) Heather McLeod, interview 1985, pp. 12,15.
contribute his ideas. In September 1946 the Auxiliary women were addressed by Bill White, a black comrade temporarily in the city as a break from mining, on the issue of high prices in a session which Ruth had helped to organize. He advised the women to continue the work they were already doing and to join consumers groups. Ruth reported to a branch meeting in April 1947 that she had attended a May Day planning committee as an representative of the Women’s Auxiliary of the MWBIU #1.129

In May 1947, Ruth wrote an article which described how the auxiliary in Vancouver was protesting the rise in the price of milk. She called for the unity of producers and consumers’ organizations against price gouging, and demanded an investigation of price spreads and of the books to decide whether this increase was a fair one. In September 1947 the branch indicated that it was up to Ruth to decide whether she would stand for office in this organization.130

The communists organized auxiliaries because they thought that women were key to supporting their men’s struggles. Ruth stated: “…the Communist Party has had elements of women’s organizing always. They had auxiliaries in the Fishermen, and they had auxiliaries in the Boilermakers and in the IWA all along… it was a matter of the interest of the working class to make the women more conscious of what was going on and why struggle was necessary.” She recalled that auxiliary women

...didn’t take up any of what are now looked upon as necessities in women’s work. We didn’t even think particularly about the women who were working in the industry, and there were quite a few …at that time. We just looked upon them as employees as we looked upon the men employees. We grumbled a bit because no women ever got on the executives,…a large number of these women were quite enlightened socially…from the Communist Party, but no, we

129 UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, Sept. 1946, April 1947.

130 Labour Challenge. May 1947, p. 2; UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2.
thought that women’s liberation was the result of the socialist revolution.131

The time she devoted to auxiliary work was not considered important within Ruth’s vanguard formation:

…it was a question of being a member of the working class…But…it wasn’t an intervention like entering the CCF would have been…I don’t think it was even considered important as a member of a Trotskyist group… rather I think I was indulged. I was permitted to do this sort of thing as long as I got up early enough in the morning to go to sell the paper at the milk driver’s which would be 4:30 and 5:00 in the morning…I never missed a mobilization to sell paper subscriptions going door to door…if I didn’t miss the other party work it was all right for me to participate in these auxiliaries, both of the Marine workers and Boilermakers.132

Despite the lack of interest by the party as a whole in work with women there were regular articles in Labour Challenge relating to women’s subjection under capitalism which pointed out how things would be better in a socialist society. The articles revealed the movement’s class analysis and the belief that women of opposing classes had little in common. Topics included birth control, the lack of social services including nurseries, the reasons for and effects of drinking and violence in the family, the lack of social services such as nurseries and general analysis of women’s oppression in capitalist society. One of the key writers on such topics was ‘Mary Wood’ who scathingly criticized women’s present situation but saw a bright future for women under socialism. That Trotskyist sympathies for women only included those of the working class was shown in a continuing cartoon feature in Labour Challenge from 1945-1952. Bourgeois women were held in contempt and portrayed as having the worst attributes of their class.

131 Ruth pointed out the contradiction between this work with union wives and the fact of the Communists wartime no strike pledge. “They knew they had to have the women with them in the strike, and yet during that period they didn’t want a strike. “ Sara Diamond, interview, pp. 37,38; Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 12.

On the topic of birth control ‘Wood’ first argued against the “stooges of capitalism” who dared to “raise that old scare story that there isn’t room for us all.” For example when Dr. Brock Chisholm, director-general of the United Nations World Health Organization stated that the world’s population was increasing at the rate of two million a month and therefore starvation could be the result soon unless an organized policy of limiting families was adopted, she recognized this as Malthusianism. ‘Wood’ believed that the bosses would use the fear of over-population to excuse the need for another war. Instead she said it was very likely that science could find ways of producing food for all. She stated: “Naturally as socialists we’re in favour of birth-control education: we believe that every woman must have the right to decide how many children she will bear. But this decision should be based on her own wishes, not the frantic hue-and-cry of capitalist propagandists.”133 ‘Wood’s’ argument was in contrast with Ruth’s views of the 1930s which had essentially agreed with Malthus, however it was in agreement with Ruth’s practise which was to provide birth control information to working class women to enable them to enjoy their sexuality. Thus, among women in the Canadian Trotskyist movement, the call for birth control to be made available to working class women was taken as a necessity for women’s liberation, even if it was not considered ‘political’ enough to be major work for the party. Indeed although ‘Wood’ thought it was obvious that her group would support birth control education, it did not merit further space in the press.

The effects of the “system” on men that led them to drinking and violence against women and children was laid out. ‘Wood’ wrote about the damaging effects of war experience and the mental instability of some returning veterans. She quoted a young veteran’s wife: “...when he came home he was so mean...once he held Jimmy way over his head, and dropped him on the floor — on purpose — his own baby! Once he tried to

133 Labour Challenge, Nov. 1948, p. 4; Ruth ‘s recipe book, her possession.
Elsewhere 'Wood' outlined the recent case in Toronto where a thirteen year old girl with cerebral palsy had been raped and killed. She believed that both the girl and her murderer were the victims of a ruthless system that had offered 13 year old Arlene none of the specialized services or education she had needed to become independent and protect herself, nor her “mentally ill” attacker any hope of recovery with psychiatric treatment. ‘Wood’s’ assumptions that extreme violence towards women and children is a sign of mental illness and that effective treatment is possible for such behaviour were open to debate, but her call for more humane social services indicated that not everything that would improve women’s lives would have to wait until after the revolution.135

In a radio speech heard by Toronto workers, Ross Dowson, who was running as a candidate in another municipal election, elaborated on the need for social services to help solve current problems, “Does anyone believe that there is not enough wealth in this city to provide day-care centres and recreation facilities that would cut into the waves of juvenile delinquency?” He added that a workers and farmers’ government would, “divert money for low rent government housing projects, hospitals, schools and nurseries”.136

In March 1948 and 1949, in reference to International Women’s Day, ‘Wood’ summarized women’s current situation. In 1948, she outlined how the technology for freeing women from household drudgery was now available, but that the wonderful new machines were financially out of reach for many. Nurseries too could go a long way to freeing women but after the war governments had found them too expensive. Commenting on women’s double work day after coming home from paid labour, she also complained that their wages were significantly lower than men’s. Indeed the minimum wage for


136 Ibid, Jan. 1949, p. 3; Other important social issues included the plight of pensioners which was investigated by ‘Wood’. A plan was laid out for how benefits would be passed on to retired workers under socialism. July-August 1947, p. 4.
women was only two-thirds that of men. Acknowledging the suffragists’ struggle, ‘Wood’ pointed out areas in Canada where women still did not have equal political rights and that under capitalism, political equality did not really mean equality anyway.137

In March 1949, ‘Wood’ took stock of women’s situation and concluded that a pattern of discrimination towards women still existed. She noted that in Ontario women still did not have the right to serve on juries, while large pay differentials still existed between men’s and women’s work. She explained how this forced women to depend on men’s incomes. ‘Wood’ cited a recent case where a judge admitted that he awarded a widow a lower amount than he should have in an accident judgement, because she was still young and attractive and would very likely remarry. ‘Wood’ countered: “No thank you Mr. Judge! We don’t want to be forced into marriage for security. We want decent pay and security as our own right, and then we’ll mould our personal lives free from economic pressure.”

‘Wood’s’ recipe for women’s liberation involved: “...taking our place in the unions, getting on the picket lines to win higher pay, organizing in the revolutionary party to wipe out the capitalist system which condemns us to inferiority through all its laws and traditions.” She criticized the feminists for using merely “sweet words” and particularly disagreed with those who believed that force was a male characteristic and that women were more conciliatory. ‘Wood’ reminded the reader that no great historical gains had ever been made by pacifism, and that to achieve a socialist world of “peace, plenty and equality” women would have to work together with men, even using force if necessary.138

Because of their traditional Marxist analysis of women’s condition which postulated that women of enemy classes had nothing in common, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party did not hesitate to criticize or make fun of bourgeois women whenever possible. Thus it

137 Ibid, Mid-Mar. 1948, p. 4.

was not objectionable to carry an ongoing cartoon feature, created by a woman which depicted a particular rich female making statements on a variety of subjects.

The cartoons were signed by Eve Grey, and were lifted from an American SWP publication, *The Militant* and occasionally changed to relate to specific Canadian events. In any case, they reveal a stereotyped image of middle class women: selfish, racist, imperialist, elitist, vain, fat, wasteful, insensitive, foolish, ambitious and ignorant. This stereotype was used for the purpose of socialist propaganda and education.

The character was named ‘Mrs. Bourgeois’. She makes comments from her class perspective on fighting the union movement, and shows ignorance and a disregard for the democratic process which at least theoretically allowed non-elites into government structures. In February 1946 she was exercising with a friend and said, “My husband tells me that we must prepare for a knock-down drag-out fight against the unions — and here I am all out of condition!” In December she wondered, “Why are socialists let on the ballot if so many people are going to vote for them?” while a month later she was outraged when examining the social register book, “How could those RWP people get so many votes? I can’t find any of them here!”

‘Mrs. Bourgeois’ also commented on inflation. Following the war, inflation mainly meant food shortages for some working people, and the purchase by the rich of black market food and luxury items. Drinking coffee in a cafe, ‘Mrs. Bourgeois’ was approached by a bedraggled woman selling pencils. Her response was, “I’m sorry, but we really couldn’t contribute to inflation by making unnecessary purchases.” The same opinionated woman said to her little poodle dog, “Why shame on you, Fifi—not to finish your nice steak—when so many people are hungry!” In another instance, ‘Mrs. Bourgeois’ went back to the reducing salon, and was in the steam boxes complaining to her friend, “It really isn’t our fault — I think black-market food is extra-

fattening.” In March 1947 this character was worried: “Oh dear—If the workers take over France, where will I buy my perfume?”

‘Mrs. Bourgeois’ was insensitive to the plight of the working class, and had no knowledge of or concern for the effect that the turns of the economy have on workers. She was equally insensitive to conditions in which some people had to live. Exultant when talking down to her cleaning lady who was hand scrubbing the floor, ‘Mrs. Bourgeois’ remarked: “Isn’t it wonderful? Finance Minister Abbott says we’re having an unprecedented boom!” She also advised her husband: “You just tell that contractor—ten months behind finishing date—why by this time we should be evicting the tenants already!” In a later cartoon, she exclaimed to a friend: “Soup kitchens in Chilliwack! Why they’re making it too easy for those people. They just won’t want to work now.” She commented on a ragged girl’s appearance: “Isn’t that child wearing an outrageous costume for Easter Sunday!” All dressed up and out for a walk with ‘Mr. Bourgeois’ and seeing a thin girl and her mangy dog she pouted, “You’d think if people must keep dogs, they’d have the decency to feed them, or at least keep them away from the Easter Parade.”

This female character also voiced her right wing and racist opinions on other issues of the day including the threat of military conscription and the United Nations. She addressed her hardworking seamstress after she saw “Military Conscription” in the newspaper, “Isn’t it wonderful — now you don’t have to worry about sending your son to college!” She commented to her friend over the phone: “I do think the UN was a good idea to start with my dear, but it was bound to fail when we let all those foreigners into it.”

Through her comments this character revealed the differences between the lives of bourgeois and working class women and the belief that women can rise in the class

structure by “marrying up”. Returning loaded with new purchases in elegant boxes from a heavy day of shopping, the tired matron exclaimed to her friend, “I don’t know where those women find the TIME to stand around on picket lines—why I’m on the go from morning ’til night!” She commented to her friend while at a sculpting class, “Isn’t it interesting to work with one’s hands for a change?” When out dancing with her husband she simpered, “And to say nothing, Darren, about all the work that it has provided those poor French people, Rita Hayworth’s marriage to Ali will renew the faith of thousands of us girls in the capitalist system—that there is still room at the top.”

In contrast to this nasty stereotype, working class women were idealized. They were the housewives, helpmates and mothers who kept up their beleaguered families’ spirits. Proletarian wives “smiled with quiet courage”, and frequently had to stretch pay cheques. Sometimes they had to wake their drunken husbands so the husbands could get to work.

In an article entitled “Two Women” Theodore Kovalesky contrasted a bourgeois woman to a working class woman. He described the latter, “This woman had felt suffering and hardships...you could see the mark of toil upon her lean body, so like the body of a roaming hunger-ridden wolf, gaunt and tight muscled, spare with the winter’s hunger.” However, maternal instincts softened her, “And when her eye turned toward her child, it lost its anger, became large and soft, the eye of a mother.” When nursing her baby in public she was, “smiling, soft-eyed she looked straight before her, exulting in the flow of life to her little one.” He concluded:

...this is the kind of woman you find in the working class. This strength, this hardness, this intractability towards all things hostile, this fierceness towards all enemies and this tenderness towards her own. This is part and parcel of the woman who has tasted toil and hardship, poverty and tragedy. This is a woman to give strength to


her man and comfort in his struggles. Such people as these will one
day rule the world.145

Both the stereotypes of the bourgeois and working class women emphasized
women’s roles in relation to the home. Women were consumers, wives and mothers. A
class analysis which meant to show that women from different classes had little in common
may also have revealed to some that in this social system women of all classes shared the
experience of being primarily responsible for the home and mothering. Women who were
paid for their labour merited articles in the press, but were not presented in a stereotypical
manner. For Marxists, “working women” became directly involved in the class struggle
and were more likely to become radical and move towards revolutionary politics. Such
women were to be taken seriously and did not need patronizing or sentimental articles such
as those on working class mothers to remind progressives of their value to their class.

Labour Challenge stopped publication in 1952. However, when the Trotskyists
began publication of the Worker’s Vanguard in 1955, the few available issues indicate that
the articles on women and women’s issues were not appreciably different in terms of the
political positions advocated. They appeared far less regularly and lacked the crisp writing
style that both Hunter and Houle writing as ‘Wood’ had specialized in, but perhaps that
reflected there was not a regular column by one writer.146

The fact that women were active in the Vancouver group from the 1940s onwards
did not prevent the issue of stereotyping from arising among the membership. Throughout
the 1940s and ’50s women comprised about one third of the membership of the Trotskyist
forces in Vancouver. In March 1946 there were two women in the Stanley Park sub-unit
of six members. By late 1947 the Vancouver branch had four female members. During the
period of the movement’s deep entry into the CCF in the 1950s, pseudonyms were used on

145 Ibid, Oct. 1949, p. 4; For a broader discussion of such issues see Eric Hobsbawm, “Man and Woman

146 Worker’s Vanguard, Mar. 1956, Mid-June 1959. See July 1956, p. 4, June 1957, p. 2, May 1958,
p. 4.
all documents so women’s participation is more difficult to track. Some women who left
the LPP in the late 1950s joined the Trotskyist movement, one of whom Shelley Rogers
had previously written for the communist’s, *Pacific Tribune*. Other women in the
Vancouver group throughout the 1940s and 50s were Winifred Henderson, Elizabeth
Wilson, Lillian Whitney, Eve Smith, Gladys Rogers, Mabel Bruce and Margaret Black. In
Toronto Ruth Benson, Lois Dowson, and Lou Marsh were members.\(^{147}\)

A number of female members were married to male comrades and were considered
by some to be not “real” members but merely “party wives”, that is women who belonged
because their husbands did and who could be relied on to do mundane tasks. Ross
Dowson, who had been a leading figure in the Canadian movement since its reorganization
after the war, questioned women’s motives for seeking membership in the movement
because he wanted to avoid formations based on anything but political differences. “I
assume that MacPhee’s and Tom’s wife are considered not on the basis that they are these
comrades wives but that they at least in a general way are in agreement with us....What is
Bradley’s wife? I am very much afraid of family cliques in a branch.”\(^{148}\) Of course he did
not question potential male members motives in the same way.

As in other socialist groups in the 1940s, women did many support, secretarial,
fund-raising, mailing, paper subscription and minor organizing tasks. Occasionally one
would be assigned a more “political” job such as writing for the paper, or serving on the
executive in a traditional female position such as treasurer. At a June 1946 meeting, Ruth
was assigned some secretarial work and mimeo notices, even though she had given her
regrets and did not attend. In October, Ruth chaired a meeting where Ellaleen MacDonald
was elected to the branch executive post of Treasurer while Ruth was not successful in her
bid for the executive position of Branch organizer. At the same meeting Ruth and Ellaleen

\(^{147}\) UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, Mar.6, May 3, Oct. 4, 1946 Oct. 3,
1947; Heather McLeod, interview 1985, pp. 4-7.

\(^{148}\) UBCA, Bullock Collection, Ross Dowson correspondence, Box 30-21, Dec. 3, 1958.
were assigned to mimeo and mail notices. Later that month, Ruth took on the job of paper subscription drive coordinator; all members assigned to this job were women.149

Throughout 1946 and into 1947 Ellaleen remained active in her executive post. Lillian Whitney was sent as a press representative for Labour Challenge to city Labour Council Meetings. At public meetings in 1946 it was always women who were assigned to collect money. In January 1947 Ruth was assigned to find a hall for a new branch headquarters and in March she headed a raffle committee. The next month Ruth and Ellaleen sold paper subscriptions at factory gates at lunch time.150

In the Canadian Trotskyist movement overt discrimination based on gender differences was not uncommon. Housewives were sometimes discouraged from joining because they were considered too “conservative”; women were passed over for education and occasionally, even driven out. If they stayed, they were given different work from that assigned to men. A pervasive stance at that time was that, “...the women are so emotional and therefore politics is a thing apart from them ...”151

This was no doubt the attitude that was behind a response when Ruth proposed another woman, Winifred Henderson for membership in 1946: “And I was informed by the then organizer, Lloyd Whalen, “What? Not another God-damned housewife!” Since I was the only other God-damned housewife present, I felt suitably reproved...I knew that I didn’t know very much, and I felt...much more humble than necessary and kept my mouth shut a great deal more than I should have done. Oh, really, I should have been shrieking

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149 UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, June 30, Oct. 14, Oct. 26, 1946.
150 UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, Oct. 26, Nov.12, 1946, Jan. 10, Mar.10, April 28, 1947.
151 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, pp. 11, 20.
As illustrated by Ruth’s response, the pervasiveness of this view probably kept many women from challenging such discrimination.

When in her forties, Ruth on three occasions was invited by the SWP as a subsidized student to the Trotskyist school in New York, Ross Dowson convinced her not to go. He argued that if a younger man went it would be more profitable for the organization in the long run. Additionally he believed that to leave Reg alone for six and a half months would be unfair. Looking back, Ruth pointed out that the young men sent in her place had long since left the organization while she has remained active.

Since the organization was tiny, the influence of personality loomed large. Ross Dowson embodied the general disrespect for women’s political potential. In Ruth’s opinion he was a charming and articulate man, but he drove several members, particularly women, out of the organization including his own family members: “...he really is an authoritarian personality, Dowson. He’s very attractive in many ways. And I have found him very informative but...he’s cunning.”

Bunny Hunter who wrote many articles as ‘Mary Wood’ could potentially have developed the party’s ideas on the woman question; however, she was eventually driven out by Dowson. A second example of the discouragement of women who were rising to leadership roles was that of the comrade, Ruth Benson, sent from the National SWP office in New York. She was to assist Dowson in the Canadian National office and to put out the newspaper. Despite her best efforts, she retreated to home in less than eighteen months.

152 Sara Diamond, interview, p. 40; UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, Oct. 4, 1946.

153 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, pp. 15,16; Along the same line of reasoning is Jack Scott’s description of his opposition to the Communist Party sending a certain B.C. woman as a representative to the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in the Soviet Union. Significantly, his reasons were based on her choice of sexual partners and her propensity to overindulge in alcohol. However as Palmer has pointed out these were not uncommon characteristics among male revolutionaries some of whom have filled their recollections with the details. Jack Scott, A Communist Life, pp. 3, 90-91.

154 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 20.
Even Dowson's own sisters and their husbands either left or were expelled over the years. However, since he spent the majority of his time in the Toronto branch, the Vancouver women were less affected by Dowson's attitudes and behaviour.

When the organization needed a job done, however, Ross did not hesitate to call. This work was not assigned with the argument that a woman would be particularly good for the job, just that no one else was available: "Well who else is there... If you can't do it, then who else is there? You name the person?" Dowson still showed little confidence in women when any one woman despite very little training did the very best job of which she was capable. The work assignment in a Leninist vanguard formation can be heavy. Ruth's work in the area of birth control and abortion was never considered "political" or worthy of being called an intervention.

Such an atmosphere of disrespect did not help female members political self-confidence, and in the 1940s women in the Vancouver branch sometimes compensated by extra preparation for presentations. That females were unsure of their political skills in relation to those of their male comrades was recorded in the minutes. In an evaluation of the Trotskyists' performance at the recent CCF provincial convention Lillian Whitney who had been an elected delegate thought that she had been: "...a washout as a delegate; [she] was sure enough of theory but couldn't get it pulled together effectively for application. Lack of experience on procedure caused me to omit to knit together several references having a bearing on the international police force."

At the same meeting Ruth apologized about her speaking ability and instead provided members with her typed written comments: "This statement is written because I am not a fluent speaker though I do feel keenly upon some of the steps taken in our group and some which I feel may be advanced as a result of an incorrect analysis of our

156 Ibid, pp. 16,19.
experience during the convention.” Despite her lack of confidence, her analysis criticized some actions and connected these to the long term work of the group and suggested ideas on future strategy.\textsuperscript{157} None of the men criticized their personal performance or indicated they had difficulty expressing their thoughts.

Women sometimes made up for their perceived lack of skills by putting extra work into their assignments. In 1947 Ruth was asked to become a specialist for internal branch education on the topics of Imperialism in Palestine and on Economics, and next came the job of addressing an RWP public forum on “Fascism in Palestine”. She prepared ahead of time and requested that she be able to first make her presentation to the branch so that she could use suggestions to improve her work.\textsuperscript{158}

Despite these attitudes towards women, the process of democratic centralism as practiced by the Trotskyists allowed women’s voices to be heard. A “beauty” debate which occurred in the American SWP in 1954 focused on women’s use of cosmetics and their attitudes towards beauty. The majority of participants revealed their belief in the necessity of working to improve women’s current lot under capitalism and that the old political line that freedom for women would only result from the socialist revolution was inadequate. This debate was instructive for Canadian Trotskyist women as it raised the “woman question” which had not been openly discussed within their section. The discussion also showed that non-leadership women could use the process of democratic centralism to make their views known to all levels of the party both nationally and internationally.

Ruth Bullock described the debate in the following way:

...this was well after the war when cosmetics were coming back again and everything was becoming more dressy and someone...wrote an article...on women’s vanity and how...revolutionary women should not wear makeup, they were...aping the bourgeoisie...they shouldn’t wear high heels, they should wear flat heels...this showed that there were many women in the

\textsuperscript{157} UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, April 30, 1946.

\textsuperscript{158} UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, Feb. 16, 1947.
movement who were falling under the...pressure of the bourgeois society and they were just becoming this type of consumer, and painting themselves!” [She remembers] about two and a half years of sweating and straining and women... writing articles refuting this and condemning the writer of the article for daring to take such a position.¹⁵⁹

Ruth believed that the economic argument had merits. She “...defended the right of women... to prepare themselves... Look we go to sell our labour on the market and we gotta dress this commodity up!... This is a consumer society and we’re for consumption, we’re not the owners... we have to package ourselves so that we’re going to be acceptable. There was a ...really marvellous argument raised..” She also thought the debate was significant because it was the first “…big fight about the women question and the narrowness of the interpretation of ‘Wait until the revolution, and the day after the revolution the women will be free.’ ”¹⁶⁰

In the July 1954 issue of the Militant a party leader, Joseph Hansen wrote “Sagging Cosmetic Lines Try a Face Lift”. Using the pen name ‘Jack Bustelo’ he stated that the recent recession had cut profits in the cosmetic industry but that a new campaign to exploit women’s insecurities was planned. After detailing the products of several companies and lampooning some of their claims, he finished on this note: “Please, girls, don’t let a cutback on the job mean a cutback on cosmetics. If you take a layoff, don’t lay off the lipstick. Remember, to keep up prosperity, keep up your makeup.”¹⁶¹ In a second article ‘Bustelo’ attacked norms of beauty saying that they were functions of society which were

¹⁵⁹ Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 35.

¹⁶⁰ This reasoning was according to Ruth, a “tight formula” that would be defeated by the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 31. The Canadian Trotskyist press did not exist from May 1952 to Nov. 1955.

determined in the final analysis by the ruling class. Like other bourgeois standards they were “ridiculous and vicious.”

The reaction among readers was immediate. ‘Bustelo’ did receive some letters which supported his point of view, but there were so many protests that an organized debate was opened for members in the SWP’s October Discussion Bulletin. This was important because it meant that the question had been recognized as a political one, even if the leadership’s intention was to instruct in a pedantic manner rather than debate on equal footing, as the presentations by the two party leaders seem to indicate.

Several readers believed that it was an economic necessity that women look good to sell their labour under capitalism and to keep their men. Thus they needed to use cosmetics at least until the advent of socialism. One believed:

Cosmetics are a prize example of the special discrimination that women workers are subjected to. Far from being a luxury (and they are taxed as such), cosmetics are a grim necessity for the older or not physically blessed woman worker. She must constantly compete, in the labour market and on the job, against younger or more attractive girls. [The writer implied the necessity of competing for men as well] if a husband strays from a worn out house wife with boisterous children, a broken-down washing machine, mountains of clothes to be mended, and a discouraged sag in her shoulders, the columnists all holler that it's all her own fault for not having changed her hairstyle and applied lipstick every morning.

Because some felt that “Bustelo” had used a ridiculing tone, readers wanted to explain why women desired and needed beauty aids, as well as the correct Marxist approach to such an issue. A few readers used the logic of beauty as a right that was due to them now and not sometime in the future. One outlined the problem:

Maybe the long hours in a factory with the job of housekeeping and child care after work has something to do with the fact that I don’t have rosy cheeks but a good spattering of wrinkles and pimples

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instead. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that my eyes
don’t sparkle and that my legs are tired and that my feet hurt.
Maybe you, Jack, want to laugh and ridicule my using popular
cosmetics to overcome some of these difficulties of working for a
living... I don’t have the money to go to a doctor about my pimples
nor do I have the time off work to rest up and get some sunshine
into my cheeks at some lake side resort.” [In conclusion] “I live in
the world as it is today...It means a good deal to me that my
husband, my children, my shop mates, and my friends enjoy my
company and that I can contribute something to the beauty and joy
of our association today according to today’s standards and not the
standards of the future society.165

Another participant, Marjorie McGowan pointed out that it was “unscientific” to
think that a socialist society would create entirely new standards. Instead socialism would
appropriate what was the best of capitalist society. Improved health and nutrition and
major changes in sexual morality had resulted in: “the long stemmed American beauty, full
of natural vitality and physical grace, with shining hair, clear eyes, smooth skin, and
natural cosmetics with a trace of accent here and there...This type of beauty is the American
social standard...it is the exclusive property of first of all youth, and secondly of
wealth...this American beauty is also neurosis-ridden...But why throw out the baby with
the bath?” She believed a concern for beauty had been present in pre-class society, and was
related to reproductive forces in the human personality therefore it was normal to want to
retain the beauty of youth. While everyone had personal rights to define beauty for
themselves, social standards are decided by the masses. She questioned why Bustelo was
imposing his: “well scrubbed look”. No doubt beauty could be found in the spirit and
character of working class women but: “...there is nothing beautiful in the dishpan hands,
the premature wrinkles, the scraggly hair, the dumpy figures in dumpy house dresses, the
ugly furniture, the hodge-podge accessories of the working class woman and her home.”
This was ultra-leftism. Instead she argued that hungering for beauty of one’s surroundings

and self was the impetus of socialist struggle, while finding beauty in squalor was acceptance of status quo.166

In response, Evelyn Reed, a party theorist and leader who shared 'Bustelo's' position, warned that "bourgeoisification" was taking place in society and some party members were being "infected". She insisted on a review of the Marxist method, asserting that class distinctions were paramount. The myth that all women want to be beautiful rested on the belief that beauty in fashion had existed throughout history for all classes of women. Reed, whose particular interest was anthropology, argued that history showed how both fashion and competition between women were linked to the rise of class society and later with the advent of capitalism to the necessity of a mass market for entrepreneurs. Thus working-class women were being intimidated into believing that beauty aids are useful. To ridicule fashion and beauty aids, she divided the market into three areas: those who mould, paint and decorate flesh and critiqued fashion, plastic surgery and beauty contests.167

A strong propaganda machine dictated that women's magazines never used a class analysis. Thus politically unaware working class readers believed they must be inferior because they did not achieve the dreams presented. She noted the racism in McGowan's version of American beauty: "...it sounds like a description of the female counterpart of the Nordic hero, of the female white supremacist. Where, in this 'standard' of beauty is there any place for the dark skinned Negro woman with kinky hair, or the short stemmed woman of the Puerto Rican, Jewish, Japanese and other European and Asiatic races, all of whom make up the working population of the country?" Reed admitted that a few concessions

must be made while living in a capitalist society, but it was important to oppose and not to adapt to these aesthetic dictates.\textsuperscript{168}

'Bustelo's' final contribution to the debate patronized his critics by suggesting their reactions were emotional. Cosmetics represented a fetish and were used by teenage girls to express a sexual interest in boys which they were not free to reveal in other ways because of the repression of the family under capitalism. In "reactionary" periods in history people had turned to external appearances and stopped thinking critically. The same was true now for those of the revolutionary vanguard who were influenced by the conscious role that American capitalism was taking in the direction of taste, culture, and beauty. He argued that Marxists should lead the way in "smashing" capitalist standards and to show the secret of fetishism of cosmetics and the delusions created by it!\textsuperscript{169}

Ruth remembers that the discussion in the American movement resulted in many women leaving the party. For women both in and around the Trotskyist movement beauty, was important and they wanted it in their lives now. The debate had raised the larger issues of what was known as "the woman question" and the party's approach had been found lacking. Women were not content to subsume their dreams and ideas for a more satisfactory life till after the revolution.\textsuperscript{170}

The beauty debate was a SWP discussion, recognized as significant and organized by the leadership according to the principles of democratic centralism. Non-leadership women participated in a written debate relating to the woman question in a national party discussion bulletin, which in this case was also read internationally. This alone was unusual within a political party in the 1950s. The fact that female comrades felt empowered to present their ideas contradicting those of two well known party leaders, indicated that the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{168} Ibid, p. 74
\item \textsuperscript{169} 'Jack Bustelo', "The Fetish of Cosmetics," Ibid, pp. 75-94.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 35.
\end{itemize}
on-going emphasis on education to create an independent thinking membership had far reaching results. It is relevant to the Canadian situation because both parties used the same organizing and educational processes to encourage the development of a critical membership capable of expressing their beliefs in lengthy written and oral forms.

That democratic centralism helped empower grass roots female members is also demonstrated by Ruth Bullock’s political career within the Canadian party. Although she had served an overly long political apprenticeship, in the late 1950s and early 1960s Ruth became recognized as an official local and later national level leader. Acting as a branch organizer built confidence for her to express her ideas in the party press and both experiences enabled her to be seen as capable of handling national responsibility. Her personal responsibilities had also changed and she was now much more free to pursue political activity. Partly as a result of her long apprenticeship, she became an efficient and assertive yet democratic and reflective organizer. An experienced female SWP leader Clara Fraser acted as her political mentor for a period of time, and Ruth’s leadership style reflected the values of the Trotskyist movement: that politics come first. She had learned the method of democratic centralism well; she was concerned with effecting a balance between the activity and efficiency of the political party and the importance of the democratic process and minority views. Through party education Ruth became the self-acting critical minded comrade which the method of democratic centralism sought to create. She was able enter into political policy making, have access to leadership and become a leader herself.

By the late 1950s Ruth still took on support jobs like recording and typing the branch minutes, but was now finally considered ready for more “political” work such as the job of organizer. Thirteen years after first running for the post, she was voted in as the Vancouver branch organizer, an executive position that would pay her a meagre wage, on January 29, 1959. The lengthy wait may have indicated a lack of trust in women’s abilities by the group and especially its leaders. Now at least on the surface she got support from
Ross Dowson, who wrote to congratulate her on her achievement: “Glad to see you made the organizer’s post ...I am sure you will do an excellent job. Count on me as one who wants you to make a complete success. I will try to be as much help as I can.”

Increasingly involved as an organizer, Ruth frequently wrote articles for the *Worker’s Vanguard*. In the December 11, 1961 issue she summarized the new labour party in “NDP—No Democracy Permitted?” and wrote an article on three B.C. strikes. The next month she penned an item on NDPer Hugh Clifford for whom she had earlier worked as a campaign manager in the 1950s. Previously an Alternate, Ruth was accepted as a national leader July 1962 when she accepted a position on the National Committee of the LSA.

When Ruth joined the Trotskyist movement she had recently left her husband and was living with, but not married to another man. Ruth had to be a model mother, or face the loss of her fourteen year old daughter who was officially under the care of the Superintendent of Child Welfare. As a homemaker and mother she was not free to devote as much time to the movement as she might have liked. When she finally achieved official recognition as a local leader she no longer had mothering responsibilities, although Reg’s reactions to her working for wages still kept her out of the work force. By this time, however, she was able to juggle her political and homemaking activities around his work schedule.

There was no formal process to encourage women’s political development in the Trotskyist movement and there was an informal and unspoken lack of trust in their abilities. However women sometimes helped other women with advice and friendship. Advice was given both on political and organizational matters, and on how to work effectively as a

171 UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-3, Jan. 29, Feb. 2, Feb. 14, April 28, 1959; correspondence Ross Dowson to Ruth Bullock, Box 30-2, Feb 17, 1959.

172 *Worker’s Vanguard*, Dec.11, 1961; UBCA, Bullock Collection, correspondence, Box 30-13, July 21, 1962.
female in leadership. Ruth was aided in her growth as a branch leader by Clara Fraser, an experienced political contact and friend in the American Trotskyist movement. An organizer for the SWP in Seattle, Clara gave Ruth support through frequent letters and occasional visits from 1959 to 1961. Not long after Ruth was elected branch organizer, Clara wrote offering some points on how to get along with Ross Dowson, then National Secretary: “Use Ross. Write him frequently, send reports, ask for advice whether you feel you need it or not, and he’ll fall all over himself helping...Sometimes, of course, you will want the executive to refer a question to him for comment, advice or permission—Yes, that’s what I said, permission, where questions of national policy are involved.” Later she congratulated Ruth who had taken her counsel: “From all reports and what I can observe from afar, you are certainly doing a terrific job in the branch and should be quite proud of yourself...Ross’ letter to you [...] sounds right proper and friendly like. I am very glad about that...he could help and support you a lot if you would use him properly—as consultant and correspondent.”173

To succeed as a branch organizer Clara advised her to assert herself and to try to keep the “big picture” in mind:

...start immediately emphasizing your political role, concerns, activities, i.e. your right to know and discuss and plan policy on regroupment, union work, the line of public speeches, branch education, etc. The administration you can handle blindfolded and everybody knows it—try to get as much of it off your hands as possible. Forget the details and think in terms of overall, synthesized branch work and let the organization of particular arenas of work flow from this overall policy designed to create the kind of branch you need and want and can see, in your mind, as workable.174

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173 UBCA, Bullock Collection, correspondence from Clara Fraser to Ruth Bullock, Box 30-4, April 29, 1959.

174 UBCA, Bullock Collection, correspondence from Clara Fraser to Ruth Bullock, Box 30-4, Feb. 4, 1959.
Clara characterized Ruth’s political style and added the necessity of perseverance:

“Of course you will be tactful and sweet and modest and restrained; you will not demand rights and authority but will gradually win them by calmly assuming them or requesting and explaining them, if you’re challenged, or dropping them if you lose only to raise the issue again at a better time.”175

Clara supported Ruth in her decision to lead the organization into public work and wrote to Dowson analyzing the Vancouver situation. She noted that the branch split had come at that point because Ruth was an organizer who was forthright in carrying through an agreed upon party tactic. She suggested that both branches be allowed to exist each using different tactics, with a joint city committee to coordinate them. Ruth outlined the situations she was dealing with in her work, such as building an unemployed workers’ association, producing a leaflet, and setting up a Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Clara responded with her observations. Ruth organized classes taught by Clara for branch members and contacts.176

Clara also expressed concern for Ruth’s health and suggested that they were friends, “How about you and me ditching all the males, members and families some time and just getting away from it all for peace, quiet, female conversation and all that sort of jazz?”177

The procedure of democratic centralism, the importance of a self-acting critical membership and a fight against all forms of bureaucracy are central to Trotskyist political groups. Members’ experiences with putting these ideas into practice also moulded emerging leaders. Ruth’s leadership style reflected the key elements of the movement’s

175 Ibid


177 UBCA, Bullock Collection, correspondence from Ruth Bullock to Clara Fraser, Box 30-4, Jan. 17, 1960.
political teachings. By the time that she was formally recognized as a branch and party leader, she had spent many years in both the socialist and Trotskyist movements. Although operating in a heavily intellectual political atmosphere dominated by men, Ruth used both her high level of demonstrated activity and the procedural securities of democratic centralism to aid her in asserting her political points of view.

Ruth was consistently active in all aspects of the party's work in the 1940s and '50s and sought advice from party members on how best to carry out her work. She frequently indicated her concerns about procedure. In 1957 Ruth criticized the content and political line in the most recent issue of the paper at a branch meeting.\footnote{UBCA, Bullock Collection, Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-2, Sept.10, 1947, Feb. 2, 1959, Jan. 8, Feb. 12, 1960.} Ruth's long experience with party support work led to an awareness of the importance of organization and a concern for efficiency. She held high expectations for her own and others work. She was organized and concerned about details and reminded Ross Dowsen to date his correspondence so it could more easily filed for future reference. Branch minutes show her desire for efficiency. She sometimes reminded other comrades of their responsibilities.

While Ruth often used her "feminine" social skills, she was not merely "nice" in her relationships with other politically involved people. Her real interest was in those who showed political capabilities. Both in the CCF and in the party Ruth was friendly and hospitable. She believed that women had to be even more diplomatic and cautious than men to gain credibility and to avoid being called "snide" and "vicious". Yet most of her relationships were based on the advancement of revolutionary political goals. To a contact in the CCF, Ruth wrote, "I have tried to explain to you that I do not have personal relationships. I am interested in people who will—or who appear to have—the potential to dedicate themselves to changing the social system in Canada to a socialist society.” However, she did consider how comrades' personal lives affected their political work.
While she was branch organizer she commented on different individuals and their situations in letters to Ross Dowson.179

An examination of the "woman question" and Canadian Trotskyism 1945 to 1960 reveals that in one way or another the group was forced to confront this question on a day to day basis. However, the political forces in the Vancouver branch devoted to work in women's organizations were and remained relatively weak. Coverage of issues pertaining to women in the press received somewhat more attention. The primary focus was economic: women as wage earners and women and high prices. The decision to use the transitional demand of the sliding scale to combat high prices was somewhat unrealistic given the relatively small size of the different housewives and consumers' associations.

Other issues relating to women's oppression under capitalism received press attention, but this did not reflect political positions taken by the movement. It was due to the interest and writing skills of two women writing as 'Mary Wood'. A cartoon feature by Eve Grey featuring 'Mrs. Bourgeois' reinforced the assertion that women of different classes had different interests. Thus although some talented and hard working women applied their organizing, writing and illustrating skills it was difficult to make innovative gains.

Within the party the gender division of labour was along traditional lines. Women did much support, financial and lower level organizational work, while men, especially those with jobs in unionized sectors carried out interventions in their Trade Unions and entered leadership positions earlier in their political careers. Overt gender discrimination was not uncommon and women served longer political apprenticeships before they were deemed capable of taking on leadership positions.

179 UBCA, Bullock Collection, correspondence Ruth Bullock to Ross Dowson, Box 30-2, May 9, 1957; Vancouver branch minutes, Box 20-3, Feb. 2, 1959, Jan. 8, Mar. 29, 1960; correspondence Ruth Bullock to Ross Dowson, Box 30-2, Jan. 11, Nov. 23, 1960; correspondence Ruth Bullock to Cliff Cawley, Box 30-4, Feb. 17, 1959; correspondence Ruth and Reg Bullock to Ross Dowson, Box 30-2, Feb. 2, 1959- Dec. 29, 1960.
However, because of the screening of membership which kept “non-serious” people of both genders out, women who were members were much less likely to be “party wives”. Those who gained entrance and stayed were active participants in written and oral debates on political policy. They did both traditional female organizing work for the party and were active in the area of theory and tactical decision making. The method of democratic centralism which emphasized the creation of a critical and independent membership, constant political education and the integration of new blood into leadership bodies was a useful tool for these women. With it a working class woman with little formal education could develop her analytical, organizational and political skills and become a leader at both the local and national levels.
CHAPTER 4 — CONCLUSION

"Seeing With Doubled Vision"

This thesis has examined several aspects of the political experiences of women and socialism in twentieth century Canada. This biography of Ruth Bullock, a working-class housewife, uses oral history to detail her long term grass-roots work for reproductive rights. Ruth’s recollections are also useful when woven into the information from conventional historical sources about the Trotskyist movement’s treatment of the woman question, because little is known about rank and file women in left political parties. A broadened definition of politics encompasses both areas of activity. The importance of Ruth’s political initiatives should be viewed for their transformative potential rather than their success or failure. In addition the tension between partisan and independent political activity and the contention that Ruth had “doubled vision” has been explored.

The influence of family and early education along with the lived experiences of the 1930s, nurtured a socialist analysis in Ruth which she, along with many other women of her generation, put into practise in the early CCF. She sought information about the improvement of women’s social role in the CCF. In the federation she found there was a typical gender division of labour and that many women were politically ignorant.

However, Ruth was involved in other progressive circles, especially on the issues of birth control and abortion. She had borne a child under difficult circumstances and for approximately forty years after she provided information and contacts in an informal network. Ruth’s social and political action greatly affected her life to the extent that her early marriage to an older man broke down. Her action and analysis of gender politics was born from both partisan and independent political activity. By the mid 1940s she was maturing as a grass-roots politician.
Partly because of the CCF position on World War II, as well as through her own reading, Ruth became convinced that the federation was no longer truly progressive for the working class. In contrast, a revolutionary approach appealed to her but not the bureaucratic version practised by the Communists. She believed that the Trotskyists who used the method of democratic centralism were more likely to provide a milieu where a working class woman could have some influence on political policy. In joining the Trotskyist Movement she pursued her radical politics.

In the 1940s and 50s, to be a Trotskyist was to be a member of a tiny revolutionary vanguard which struggled to influence workers through political struggle and education. Becoming a member was no simple matter; agreement with the political program and the method of democratic centralism was essential. Comrades worked extremely hard for "the Movement". Trotskyists did not expect that their party would grow very much until the objective conditions changed, and in fact, it remained about the same size, around 100 members, throughout these two decades. Because it was very small, individuals could wield a lot of power.

To comrades of the Fourth International it was important to ensure democracy and avoid bureaucracy. The democratic centralist method involved all members in policy formation and all could be considered for leadership positions. As it was necessary to apply it to constantly changing conditions, there is evidence that the method did not always work well in the Canadian context. Democratic centralism tended to encourage dissension, and an authoritarian leader existed for much of the two decades. However, the method enabled members to question and theorize, and there was active discussion and debate on tactics, political positions and the formation of policy. Additionally members had access to leadership. Much reading was required and political education was ongoing.

Relatively little time was spent on the "woman question" in Trotskyist groups in this time period. Few political resources and limited space in the press were allocated to it. In their public politics the two issues which received the most attention were primarily
economic, that is support for better conditions for female workers including unionization, and the building of “Housewives” organizations to fight high prices. Although some female comrades strove to connect the union auxiliaries to these consumer associations, this was not recognized as “real” political work. The group’s application of Trotsky’s concept of the sliding scale of wages with prices to this area of political action was unrealistic. It was a “transitional demand”, inappropriate given the strength of the union and consumer association movements at the time.

An ongoing cartoon feature in the Trotskyist press, Labour Challenge, reiterated the Marxist position that women of different classes had little in common and that bourgeois women represented the worst characteristics of their class. An alternative positive stereotype of working class women as the “salt of the earth” was also promoted. Two women writing as ‘Mary Wood’ focused on issues relating to women’s oppression, such as birth control, the lack of social services including nurseries, the drudgery of housework and the reasons for violence in the family. ‘Wood’ emphasized how things would be better under socialism. However, this work did not reflect key political initiatives made by the group.

The Trotskyists had no stated position on birth control and abortion and Ruth’s work in this area was not considered “political”. An affirmative action process to encourage women’s leadership within the movement did not exist, though Ruth was informally mentored by an experienced American Trotskyist organizer.

Women did not meet separately from men. The view was that separate meetings would divide party work unnecessarily and that the revolutionary movement needs to be a “cohesive whole”. Because of the small size of the group, a women’s subgroup may have added extra work to the comrades already overburdened schedules.180

180 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 9. Eve Grey Smith while in the CCF in the 1930s argued against separate meetings for women, Sangster, Dreams of Equality, p. 97. She later became a member of the Trotskyist movement.
A typical gender division of labour existed in the party. Men did the prestigious "brain" work, while women did the mundane routine duties requiring detailed attention. Discrimination along gender lines was not uncommon, and women who did not work outside the home were less valued as potential recruits. Before they entered leadership, women usually served more lengthy apprenticeships.

However, a discussion within the American Trotskyist movement on the issue of beauty grew into a full internal discussion sponsored by the national executive. The widened debate was perceived by many to be about "the woman question". Canadian members watched the exchange with interest. A significant group of American comrades of both genders supported the political position that reforms and ameliorations of women's condition and social role were necessary now, and could not be put off till after the revolution. Thus, the norms for discussions mandated by democratic centralism were used by politically astute members to ensure that rank and file women could expound their views to an international audience.

Women who gained entrance to the vanguard party were unlikely to be "party wives" because of the high standard and requirements of membership. They did both typical female organizing work and participated in oral and literary debates on policy, theory and decision making. The ongoing education, and the circulation of new people into leadership mandated by democratic centralism plus the small size of the Trotskyist movement also benefited women. Ruth Bullock, a working class woman, developed organizational, political, and analytical skills while learning leadership roles. She then applied these in the movement at both the local and national level.

Joan Sangster has argued that both internal factors and external realities explain why the Communists and the CCF failed to deal with the woman's question from 1920 to 1950. Neither party struggled with the issue openly or repeatedly. The CPC received Comintern advice on the question which rapidly evolved into rigid dictates. The CCF had a lack of theoretical interest in the area. Also the social composition of the parties meant that
many members were from working class or emigrant backgrounds and were primarily politicized by the issue of class. In the CPC Leninism or democratic centralism meant too much deference to leaders and little inner party democracy. The result was that female members who were likely less politically self confident did not develop or advance into leadership.

The external realities of the time period included a harsh economic climate. In addition, the patriarchal relationships of capitalism dictated strong reigning cultural ideals. These ideals included familial ideology and its prescribed domestic role for women, with motherhood considered as a natural role, as well as masculine and feminine stereotypes. Both the Communists and the CCF reflected such ideals in their work with women.181

The external context for the period of this study was not markedly different, and thus the realities outlined by Sangster also help to account for the Trotskyists’ lack of action on the woman question. Within the party, the class background of the members was similar to those outlined by Sangster since the vast majority either had been members of the CPC or were currently still members of the CCF. As well, the Trotskyist movement like the other parties never tried systematically to explore the issue despite the fact that they too had inherited from Marxism a theoretical interest in the question.

The key factor which made the political experience different for women in the Trotskyist party was the functioning of democratic centralism. Indeed, there was a problem with an entrenched leader in Ruth’s opinion: “...All the years that Ross was in control he was in total control. People did as Ross saw it...there was a great deal of centralism and damned little democracy.”182

181 Ibid, pp. 229-238.

182 Sheila Rowbotham has pointed out that within a vanguard party the process of figuring out who has the most “advanced” or correct position is not neutral. Those in power are able to have inordinate influence, and feminist ideas can be dismissed by male leaders as dangerous and wrong. Sheila Rowbotham, “The Women’s Movement and Organizing For Socialism,” Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism, eds. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright (London: Merlin, 1979), pp. 21-155.
However, Trotskyists had added to the concept of democratic centralism. As Ruth pointed out, they focused on the balance between centralism and democracy. Ideally, both were key to an efficient and accessible party. In fact, this was one of the foundation issues of their movement. In addition, the Trotskyist organization was much smaller than the CPC. This disparity in size made the issue of geographic dispersion and the resulting tendency for decentralization even more powerful. Therefore, despite Ross Dowson's efforts at control, the Canadian section was so small that he could wield only limited resources to consolidate his power. In addition, party branches were far flung which favoured decentralization. Vancouver, with a relatively large number of members, was a very long way from the relatively weak party center in Toronto.

The Trotskyists tried but did not deal creatively with the woman's question in the 1940s and 50s. However, the relative democracy that existed in the party meant that when the women's movement grew in the 1960s the Trotskyists could acknowledge and respond to the obvious social and political issues. As well, some old time members were open to and inspired by the women's movement, although feminists pointed to huge gaps in the party's theoretical analysis and challenged some of its basic organizational tenants. The receptivity of both the party and its individual members proved that the Trotskyist party had not been an inhospitable roost for radicals concerned with the condition of women during a period when there had been a dearth of coordinated large scale political activity by feminists.

In the 1960s and '70s, Trotskyists agreed with some of the positions of the 'second wave' feminists, however, the organizing process of the two movements was different. Traditionally, democratic centralism instructed that decisions were made inside the party first and then applied in an organized fashion to outside organizations. Now the ideas and norms of the women's movement affected what went on inside the party as well. This was
because many of the new student members recruited at that time brought feminist ideas with them. 183

Old time members such as Ruth had come to maturity after the ‘first wave’ of feminism was no longer so visible. Although Ruth had met many women sympathetic to women’s issues in the progressive organizations in which she worked, she had not considered herself a feminist. As a member of the Trotskyist party, she shared Mary Wood’s assumptions about feminism in the 1940s that the moralistic maternal feminists did not recognize the militant action of which women were capable.

In addition, the Trotskyist party had provided a positive milieu for a woman such as Ruth, especially given the alternatives of the time period. Ruth’s choice of party was a reflection of her desire for a challenging political process; the party fostered an intellectual interest in her. The method of democratic centralism allowed for the tradition of a self-acting membership. This tradition made it possible to develop a questioning mind which contributed to individual independence. Ruth used this to her advantage. The organization has thus been an effective vehicle in which she could pursue socialist politics in a democratic fashion, and it has aided her political development in such a way that she was receptive to the ideas of the women’s movement.

However, Ruth’s role and political activity during the 1940s was very much limited by the fact that she still had mothering responsibilities. The movement made no

183 Several developments occurred which illustrated this interaction. The Vancouver branch took a position against sexual harassment. The LSA put together a brief for the Federal Women’s Commission and the question of whether separate women’s caucuses within the LSA were necessary was debated and experimented with. Along with other women, Trotskyists demystified their understanding of rape, worked on the issue of contraception and abortion and celebrated International Women’s Day. Although individual members learned that much could be done within the confines of capitalism to improve women’s lot, their method of “intervening” in the women’s movement with a “party line” was not appreciated by other feminists. The issue of whether the collective model is the feminist structure has been debated by writers such as Janice L. Ristock, “Feminist Collectives: The Struggles and Contradictions in our Quest for a Uniquely Feminist Structure,” Women and Social Change, Feminist Activism in Canada eds. Jeri Dawn Wine and Janice L. Ristock (Toronto:Lorimer, 1991), pp. 41-55; and Jo Freeman, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” Radical Feminism eds. Anne Koedt, et al (New York: Quadrangle, 1973), pp. 285-299. Heather McLeod, interview 1985, pp. 13,21-23,28,29,31.
arrangements for childcare, which meant that women found sustained, rather than episodic political activity, difficult. Ruth referred to this problem female comrades often faced as "the impediment of small children." The Trotskyist movement in this period was thus a good political training ground for women in only a narrow intellectual sense.

Due in part to this limitation, some female comrades became convinced that the traditional Marxist analysis was not sufficient for dealing with the woman question. Additionally the women's movement struggled to widen the concept of politics. Previously politics were associated with the public sphere, while personal issues were associated with the private sphere. Now feminists asked whether control of reproduction was a personal or political activity. Ruth's long time provision of contraception and abortion information meant that she was open to the new initiatives. Her work had not been seen as "political" by her comrades, but she had constantly looked for ways of solving this problem. She was thus inspired by creative actions such as the Women's Abortion Caravan in 1960s, and encouraged by Dr. Morgentaler's ongoing struggle for increased access to abortion in the 70s and 80s: "I thought the Women's Caravan and Dr. Morganteler's struggles for abortion were just fantastic. And these women did so many things I would never even have thought of doing!....For instance even going on that Caravan was a bloody courageous thing!"

Thus the women's liberation movement broadened and deepened Ruth's overall political understanding. She came to see that much could be achieved for women in capitalist society. Ruth noted:

When I started out first, I tied myself to socialism...and then later to the ideas of a revolutionary socialist overturn of society because from my earliest reading,...I came to the conclusion that the capitalist system was...anti-social, anti-life and that it was wrong in practically every aspect. And that one had to work very single-mindedly to get rid of this system before there could be any

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184 Heather McLeod, interview 1985, p. 12.

burgeoning, any growth of the human personality. I still think that fundamentally there will be no great progress in the human condition...until we do change our system of providing the basic necessities of life,...until we have a new estimate really of consumerism, until we no longer produce for profit. And I know that the old CCF slogan of production for use and not for profit is correct. But there’s so much more! That’s an oversimplified approach...There is so much more to being a human being than just being able to have a place to sleep at night, and something to eat, and some clothes to put on one’s back. But when the Women’s Liberation Movement rose in the 1960s, now I had always been for an examination of the woman question, I had always been for birth control, for the necessities of abortion, I had always been indignant at what happened to women in society as compared to their brothers. Still when things began opening up...I learned so much. Sometimes my head was reeling. It was like looking up into the summer sky and seeing all those uncountable numbers of stars. And I would listen to these young women,...and even if some was really repugnant to me...overall I was filled with admiration for them.186

The influence of the women’s movement led Ruth to theoretically accept what she had been practising for many years: that improvements in women lives were possible under capitalism and that there was a necessity for alternative structures to the revolutionary vanguard party, in which women could work on issues pertaining to their oppression. Thus she was seeing with “double vision”: that both integrated work with men in a hierarchical structure such as the Trotskyist Movement and women working in their own organizations could transform society.

Ruth concluded with genuine enthusiasm that she had learned much in the later part of her life: “...we’ve got this feeling of being sisters...That was considered at first as sentimental...and subjective and romantic...but by the gods of war its a hell of a strong piece of armour!”187 She continued:

Well you can imagine what its like for me born in 1909, you know the changes that I have seen. But all the time that thrust, that

186 The widespread stereotype of bra-burning was objectionable to Ruth as well as the postponement of motherhood. She believed that to avoid bearing children was a fad and that reproduction is an important part of women’s sexual life. At the same time she recognized that the economic position of many women mitigates against early pregnancy. Ibid, p. 25.

demand for my independence, ...that I be recognized as a person. What a thing to find all of a sudden, it's like seeing mushrooms grow after 1967. To see women saying “Well of course!”, to see all these books coming out,...They've taught me so many things!188

188 Ibid, p. 22.
"I've always said a woman's place is in the home. Aren't you happier here than working in that old war plant?"

Cartoon in Labour Challenge, October, 1945, p. 6
"I don't know where those women find the TIME to stand around on picket lines—why I'm on the go from morning 'til night!"

Cartoon in *Labour Challenge*, Mid July, 1946, p. 4
As Mr. Pierpont was telling me last night—this automation isn't much different from the labor saving devices we women have been using for years.
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