

**ORGANIZING THE UNORGANIZED: THE SERVICE,  
OFFICE, AND RETAIL WORKERS' UNION OF CANADA  
(SORWUC), 1972-1986**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), an independent, grassroots, socialist feminist union that organized unorganized workers in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s. It looks at SORWUC's role in Canadian labour history in general, and its efforts to organize unorganized workers in particular, focusing on SORWUC's efforts to organize workers at a pub and a restaurant in British Columbia. The central thesis of this work is that SORWUC's socialist feminist unionism and commitment to organizing unorganized workers positioned the union as radically different from much of the 1970s Canadian labour movement, and that this difference both helped and hindered the union in its efforts to organize the unorganized. By examining SORWUC from this neglected perspective, this thesis ultimately aims to demonstrate SORWUC's importance to the historiography of class and labour organizing in Canada.

**Keywords:** Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC); Labour Unions; Socialist Feminism; Labour Organizing; Service Industry; British Columbia; Canada



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*It is a farce to think we are negotiating as individuals...Our campaign showed that by acting collectively...we can establish a new relationship between ourselves and our employers....The problem is that the majority of workers are still unorganized and therefore powerless. When the trade union movement represents most working people, instead of a minority, it will be possible to overcome the divisions between workers. We can then deal with general social questions that can't be solved within a single workplace or industry.*

—The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers (SORWUC)*, (1979)

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AIM	American Indian Movement
AUCE	Association of University and College Employees
BCLRB	British Columbia Labour Relations Board
CLRB	Canada Labour Relations Board
CAIMAW	Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical, and Allied Workers
CLC	Canadian Labour Congress
CUPE	Canadian Union of Public Employees
CCU	Confederation of Canadian Unions
HERE	Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
Local 40	Local 40 of the Hotel, Restaurant, Culinary Workers, and Bartenders' Union
OTEU	Office and Technical Employees' Union
PSAC	Public Service Alliance of Canada
SFU	Simon Fraser University
SORWUC	Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada
UBC	University of British Columbia
WWA	Working Women's Association
WWW	Working Women's Workshop

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On 24 January 1977, the British Columbia Labour Relations Board (BCLRB) certified Local 1 of the Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC) to represent the workers at Bimini neighbourhood pub in Vancouver, British Columbia.<sup>1</sup> Dissatisfied with their current working conditions and frustrated by their inability to change these conditions, the Bimini workers had decided to organize their workplace and, after contacting several unions, settled on SORWUC: an independent, grassroots, socialist feminist union dedicated to organizing unorganized workers. Upon receiving certification, the unionized workers set to the difficult task of negotiating a first contract. For the Bimini workers, the major issues were wages and control over their working conditions; their demands included wage increases, seniority rights, and employee participation in scheduling.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Bimini owner Peter Uram had no interest in negotiating with SORWUC, and after ten months of failed negotiations, the workers had had enough. On 20 October 1977, the Bimini workers went on strike.

The Bimini strike lasted ten weeks. Throughout the strike, many members of the local labour movement rallied behind SORWUC, assisting the Bimini workers both on and off the picket line.<sup>3</sup> Yet not all unions supported SORWUC's efforts to organize the Bimini workers. One month after the onset of the strike, with SORWUC's picket line

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the sources refer to the pub as "Bimini;" however, its current name is "Bimini's." It is unclear whether this difference is due to an error in the sources or a change in name. To remain consistent with the majority of the sources, I use "Bimini."

<sup>2</sup> "Strike hurts Bimini business," *The Ubysey*, 21 October 1977.

<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, the term "labour movement" refers to the formal unions and institutions that represent workers.

holding strong, Local 40 of the Hotel, Restaurant, Culinary Workers, and Bartenders' Union (Local 40) submitted an application for certification of the Bimini workers to the BCLRB. In doing so, Local 40 was not only raiding SORWUC but also undermining the Bimini strike. SORWUC spokesperson Pat Barter insisted that in order to collect the signatures necessary for the certification application, Local 40 would have had to cross SORWUC's picket line and sign up scabs working inside the pub.<sup>4</sup> As spokesperson for the Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical, and Allied Workers (CAIMAW) Jess Succamore put it, Local 40 was "strike-breaking and proud of it."<sup>5</sup> In defending the union's application for certification at Bimini, Local 40 vice-president John Phillips argued that Local 40 was not strike-breaking because the Bimini's strike was not really a strike. Phillips argued, "The demands they [SORWUC members] are making preclude it from being a strike."<sup>6</sup> He further explained that he viewed SORWUC as a "women's liberation organization rather than a trade union."<sup>7</sup>

In labelling SORWUC a women's liberation organization rather than a trade union, Phillips's comments highlight a fundamental problem with the perception of SORWUC, a problem that continues to shape the union's place in the historiography of Canadian labour. Specifically, to date, historians have only briefly examined SORWUC within broader discussions of gender and the 1970s Canadian labour movement. As a result, the union's significance to the historiography of class and labour organizing in Canada remains unexplored. To counter this trend, this thesis examines SORWUC as a

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<sup>4</sup> "Inter-union battle shaping over Bimini," *The Province*, 26 November 1977. Local 40 of the Hotel, Restaurant, Culinary Workers, and Bartenders' Union has since become UNITE HERE! Local 40. For more information on Local 40, see Jeremy Milloy, "Fast Food Alienation: Service Work and Unionism in British Columbia, 1968-1998" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> "Union now fights union in Bimini pub strike," *The Vancouver Sun*, 26 November 1977.

<sup>6</sup> "Hotel union asks certification at strike-bound Bimini pub," *The Vancouver Sun*, 25 November 1977.

<sup>7</sup> "Inter-union battle shaping over Bimini," *The Province*, 26 November 1977.

union: an organization of workers that used collective bargaining to improve its members' wages and working conditions.<sup>8</sup> It argues that as an independent, grassroots, socialist feminist union dedicated to organizing unorganized workers, SORWUC differed markedly from much of the Canadian labour movement. It further argues that this difference both helped and hindered the union in its struggle to organize workers in organized industries.

Although academic historians have yet to write an in-depth analysis of SORWUC, SORWUC members have produced several publications that discuss the history of the union and its organizing activities.<sup>9</sup> SORWUC members have also contributed to edited volumes on women and work.<sup>10</sup> These works provide valuable first-hand accounts of the union's history and its efforts to organize unorganized workers in banks and restaurants, as well as additional information on the motivations and aims of some of SORWUC's key members. Yet the publications written by SORWUC members do not connect the

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<sup>8</sup> The 1973 Labour Code of British Columbia defined a trade union as "an organization or association of employees...that has as one of its purposes, the regulation in the Province [of British Columbia] of relations between employers and employees through collective bargaining." B.C. Bill 11 – Labour Code of British Columbia Act as cited in *Canadian Labour Law Reports* no. 522 (15 October 1973): 6.

<sup>9</sup> In 1979, several SORWUC members published a short book detailing the union's struggle to organize Canadian bank workers. The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers (SORWUC)* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1979). In 1981, SORWUC member Helen Potrebenko printed a poem discussing the union's ongoing battle to organize indigenous restaurant workers at Muckamuck, a First Nations-themed restaurant in Vancouver, British Columbia. Helen Potrebenko, *Two Years on the Muckamuck Line* (Vancouver: Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada, 1981). Most recently, in 1997, former SORWUC member Janet Nicol published an article in the labour history journal *Labour/Le Travail* analyzing the Muckamuck dispute in relation to issues of race and indigenous labour. Janet M. Nicol, "'Unions Aren't Native': The Muckamuck Restaurant Labour Dispute, Vancouver, BC (1978-1983)," *Labour/Le Travail* 40 (Fall 1997): 235-251.

<sup>10</sup> A 1972 anthology of the Canadian women's movement included an article by SORWUC member Jean Rands on the need to organize women workers. Jean Rands, "Toward an Organization of Working Women," in *Women Unite! An Anthology of the Canadian Women's Movement*, eds. Bonnie Campbell et al. (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1972), 141-148. Several members from SORWUC and the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE), another feminist union formed shortly after SORWUC, wrote a chapter discussing the importance of independent feminist unions in an edited book on the Second Wave women's movement in Canada. Jackie Ainsworth et al., "Getting Organized...in the Feminist Unions," in *Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today*, eds. Maureen Fitzgerald et al. (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982), 132-140.

history of SORWUC to the broader historiography of the Canadian labour movement. Therefore, they do little to further our understanding of the union's historical contributions to labour organizing in Canada. Historians who have discussed SORWUC usually cite the union as evidence for broader arguments about the ways in which women challenged the 1970s Canadian labour movement.<sup>11</sup> Thus, outside of brief mention in a few texts discussing the gender dynamics of the 1970s labour movement, SORWUC has disappeared from Canadian labour history.

Historians' decision to focus on the gendered aspect of SORWUC, if at all, reflects broader changes and debates in the writing of history in general and labour history in particular. The crux of the debate is whether class is the fundamental category of historical analysis.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, some scholars, utilizing the Marxist definition of classes as "groups of people connected to one another, and made different from one another, by the ways they interact when producing goods and services," contend that class has been, and continues to be, the fundamental analytical category in studies of

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<sup>11</sup> For example, in examining the history of the Canadian labour movement, historian Craig Heron briefly describes SORWUC as one of several groups of women who, during the 1970s, pushed for an increase in women's participation in union activities. Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Brief History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., 1996), 145. Similarly, in an article on working-class feminism, historian Meg Luxton uses SORWUC as an example of "women's organizing activities in unions" during the 1970s. Meg Luxton, "Feminism as a Class Act: Working-Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail* 48 (Fall 2001): 71-72.

<sup>12</sup> My discussion of class as the fundamental category of historical analysis draws on historian Mark Leier's argument that fundamental in this context does not mean "the sole source of oppression" but rather, "that without which the society could not function as it does at present." Responding to historian Veronica Strong-Boag's comments on his argument, Leier states, "It is obvious that capitalist societies cannot survive without class exploitation—that is their very basis. To claim that other oppressions are also fundamental, Professor Strong-Boag needs to show that capitalism could not survive the elimination of the injustices that she lists or that the inequalities she names are essential to the running of this society." Mark Leier, "Response to Professors Palmer, Strong-Boag, and McDonald," *BC Studies* 111 (Autumn 1996): 94. For the full discussion, see Mark Leier, "W[h]ither Labour History: Regionalism, Class, and the Writing of History," *BC Studies* 111 (Autumn 1996): 61-75; Veronica Strong-Boag, "Moving Beyond Tired 'Truths': Or, Let's Not Fight the Old Battles," *BC Studies* 111 (Autumn 1996): 84-87.

historical change.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, over the past three decades the majority of academics have turned away from the Marxist definition of class. In place of the Marxist view that material circumstances, and the ways in which humans interact with and alter these material circumstances, shape all other facets of human life, many contemporary scholars instead subscribe to the view that “historically situated discursive forms of politics (‘language’) articulate ‘experience.’”<sup>14</sup> Thus, critics of class analysis argue that historical events that lack clear demonstrations of narrow “class indicators” benefit more from analyses of gender, race or ethnicity than class.<sup>15</sup> This thesis addresses this debate directly. Specifically, in examining SORWUC as a socialist feminist union—a working-class organization based on the principle that women could exercise power over their lives through their collective control of their labour and by utilizing collective bargaining and strikes to achieve social change—it argues that SORWUC is an important historical example of the ways in which gender and class intersect. It further argues that to ignore the class dimension of SORWUC obscures a fundamental aspect of the union and its contributions to the history of labour organizing in Canada.

The debate over the relative importance of class analysis has been particularly heated in labour historiography, especially that looking at women. Given the first

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 11. See also Tom Bottomore, “Class,” in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1991), 84-87.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Joyce, “Introduction,” in *Class*, ed. Patrick Joyce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 14. For a closer look at the debate over experience and language, see Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” in *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion Across the Disciplines*, eds. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 363-387; Thomas C. Holt, “Experience and the Politics of Intellectual Inquiry,” in *Questions of Evidence*, 388-396; Joan W. Scott, “A Rejoinder to Thomas C. Holt,” in *Questions of Evidence*, 397-400. For more on scholars’ shift away from class analysis, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New “True” Socialism* (London: Verso, 1998); Geoff Eley and Keith Neld, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Joyce, “Introduction,” 10.

women's historians' close connections to Thompson, Marxism, and socialism, many early women's histories focused on labour and the economy and women's role in both.<sup>16</sup>

Yet despite the amount of work generated on the topic, women's history continued to

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<sup>16</sup> A product of the 1960s and the Second Wave women's movement that focused on achieving economic and social equality for women, the writing of women's labour history was part of a broader trend of increasing interest in feminist theory and research on women. Like other historians trained in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the first generation of women's historians was greatly influenced by the work of British historian E.P. Thompson, particularly his writings on the Marxist theory of historical materialism and its definition of class as a social relationship. In contrast to those academics who employed class as a rigid socio-economic category, Thompson ultimately defined class as the relationship that "happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter voluntarily." E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 9. Note that Thompson uses gendered language, as was typical in the early 1960s.

Building on Thompson's work, the first women's historians sought to include women's experiences in the new social history. At the same time, they acknowledged the need to gender Thompson's historical materialist approach. See, for example, Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1973); Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago, 1983). In answer to these and other feminists' calls for a conceptual framework that could simultaneously address women's class and gender experiences, some early women's historians turned to Marxist feminism or socialist feminism. In particular, they utilized the Marxist feminist theory of "dual systems," a mode of analysis that purports that "under the reign of capitalist patriarchy, class exploitation and gender oppression [operate] interactively." Theodore Koditschek, "The Gendering of the British Working Class," *Gender & History* 9, no. 2 (August 1997): 336. For examples of the dual systems approach, see Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex," *Signs* 1 (Spring 1976): 137-170; Jane Humphries, "Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working-Class Family," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 1 (1977): 241-258; *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979). Despite the publication of several important works that utilized the dual systems theory, Marxist feminist and socialist feminist studies remained unsatisfactory in the minds of many feminists, as such work tended to "subsume the feminist struggle into the 'larger' struggle against capital." Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in *Women & Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Montréal: Black Rose Books Ltd., 1981), 2. Unable to resolve these problems of theoretical inequality, by the end of the 1980s Marxism and feminism had mostly parted ways.

remain peripheral to “traditional” history.<sup>17</sup> Some women’s historians began to wonder whether the separate study of women was not simply perpetuating the perception and practice of women as marginal to the rest of society.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, this line of questioning pushed women’s historians to develop gender as a category of historical analysis in the mid-1980s.<sup>19</sup>

The new theories on gender stirred a great deal of debate amongst historians. In particular, a number of historians criticized academics’ increasing incorporation of post-structuralist theories of language as politically conservative and inimical to the left’s

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<sup>17</sup> Early women’s histories that focused on women and labour include Barbara Mayer Wertheimer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of US Women’s Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985). In the Canadian context, early texts published on women’s work include *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930*, eds. Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith, and Bonnie Shepard (Toronto: Canadian Women’s Educational Press, 1974); The Corrective Collective, *Never Done: Three Centuries of Women’s Work in Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Women’s Educational Press, 1974); Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women’s Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women’s Educational Press, 1980). Early studies looking at women and work in British Columbia specifically include Star Rosenthal, “Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver, 1900-1915,” *BC Studies* 41 (Spring 1979): 36-55; *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women’s Work in British Columbia*, eds. Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro (Victoria, BC: Camosun College, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Placing Women’s History in History,” *New Left Review* 133 (May-June 1982): 5-29; Denise Riley, “Am I That Name?” *Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> Although no one individual can claim credit for the establishment of gender as a category of historical analysis, the scholar most associated with its legitimization is Joan Scott. Drawing on theories of language formulated by such post-structuralist theorists as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, Scott argued that language, defined as “the creation of meaning through difference,” constitutes reality by interpreting it. Scott thus concluded that gender, as a primary means of articulating difference, is constructed, embedded, and perpetuated in all aspects of society. While Scott’s arguments did much to advance the historical study of women and gender, they had serious implications for class analysis. Specifically, in place of the Marxist definition of class as a social relationship based on lived experience, Scott posited that class is “an identity historically and contextually created.” Thus Scott ultimately concluded that, rather than study class formation, struggle, and experience, historians should examine the discursive process through which class identity is constructed. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 55-59. Originally published in 1988, this book is a collection of previously published articles. The chapter I rely on here originally appeared as Joan W. Scott, “On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (1987): 1-13.

project of achieving radical social change.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, other historians saw gender history as the next step in broadening the path paved by women's historians.<sup>21</sup>

Highlighting "the gendered character of the historical concepts used to study both men and women," they called for the construction of a "gendered labour history."<sup>22</sup> This new labour history would view gender "as a fundamental category of all historical analysis" and seek "to understand how gender operates, and the ways it has shaped and been shaped by economic institutions and relationships."<sup>23</sup> Building on these theoretical developments, the early 1990s witnessed a significant increase in the number of

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<sup>20</sup> For example, Marxist historian Bryan Palmer critiqued gender analysis as one aspect of a broader academic shift away from historical materialism and towards post-structuralism. Specifically, Palmer was concerned that post-structuralist theory—on which gender analysis draws heavily—downplays class and class struggle as "essential components of lived experience" and important historical forces, and instead views language as the determining factor in studies of historical change. Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), xiii-xiv. For Palmer's original comments on Scott's work, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Response to Joan Scott," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (1987): 14-23. For a more recent version of this debate, see Bryan Palmer, "Historiographic Hassles: Class, Gender, Evidence and Interpretation," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 33, no. 65 (May 2000): 105-144; Lynne Marks, "Heroes and Hallelujahs—Labour History and the Social History of Religion in English Canada: A Response to Bryan Palmer," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 34, no. 67 (2001): 169-186.

In the field of women's labour history, some historians expressed concern over the construction of women's history and gender history as distinct and antithetical methods of historical analysis. They feared that an emphasis on gender analysis would lead women's history to "be disdained or...the feminist, political, and emancipatory edge to women's history [...to] be dulled." Joan Sangster, "Beyond Dichotomies: Reassessing Gender History and Women's History in Canada," *left history* 3, no. 2 (1995): 113. See also Joan Sangster, "Reconsidering Dichotomies," *left history* 3, no. 2 (1995): 239-248; Judith M. Bennett, "Feminism and History," *Gender & History* 1, no. 3 (September 1989): 252-272; Joan Hoff, "Gender as a Postmodern Category of Paralysis," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 2 (June 1994): 149-168. For examples of this debate in an international context, see Gisela Bock, "Women's History and Gender History: Aspects of an International Debate," *Gender & History* 1, no. 1 (March 1989): 7-30; Sonya O. Rose, "Introduction to Dialogue: Gender History/Women's History: Is Feminist Scholarship Losing Its Critical Edge?" *Journal of Women's History* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 89-128.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Franca Iacovetta et al., "Introduction," in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, eds. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde" (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), xi-xvii; Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *Canadian Historical Review* 76, no. 3 (September 1995): 354-376; Karen Dubinsky and Lynne Marks, "Beyond Purity: A Response to Sangster," *left history* 3, no. 2 (1995): 205-220; Franca Iacovetta and Linda Kealey, "Women's History, Gender History, and Debating Dichotomies," *left history* 3, no. 2 (1995): 221-237. For a discussion of gender and women's history in the British Columbia context, see *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women*, eds. Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Ava Baron, "Gender and Labor History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future," in *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*, ed. Ava Baron (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> Baron, "Gender and Labor History," 19-20.

publications examining gender and labour history.<sup>24</sup> While many labour historians opted for a gender analysis grounded in post-structuralist theory and discourse analysis, some chose to incorporate gender analysis into their work while remaining firmly rooted in historical materialism and its focus on class experience.<sup>25</sup> In addition, since this time, scholars have continued to theorize about the relationship between gender and class.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, while historians today generally consider gender a legitimate, if not essential, category of historical analysis, many scholars have distanced themselves from class. Although historians still mention class in academic discourse, they usually present it as merely one of a multitude of identities shaping human lives. While it is indisputable that different identities influence peoples' lives, the decision to ignore the crucial role of class results in incomplete historical analyses. As Marxist scholar Ellen Meiksins Wood explains, scholars who view class only as a category necessarily focus on difference, inequality, and hierarchy instead of relations between classes and in doing so, remove important relations such as domination and exploitation.<sup>27</sup> Thus, I contend that

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<sup>24</sup> For an overview of works published in the early 1990s on the history of gender and labour in Canada, see Bettina Bradbury, "Women and the History of Their Work in Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 159-178. Over the course of the 1990s, Canadian labour historians also began to look at the connections between gender, race, and ethnicity. See, for example, Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992). In the British Columbia context, see Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); Gillian Creese, *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class, and Race in a White-Collar Union, 1944-1994* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> For examples of the former, see Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). For an example of the latter, see Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Joan Sangster, "Feminism and the Making of Canadian Working-Class History: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future," *Labour/Le Travail* 46 (Fall 2000): 127-165; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 93.

although historians must be sensitive to the ways in which various social divisions shape class experience, an historical analysis that downplays the fundamental role of class obscures an important aspect of how and why people organize for social change. To counter this trend, this thesis emphasizes the class dimension of SORWUC while acknowledging the important role of gender.

In constructing a fresh fusion of class and gender analysis, this work draws on the theoretical insights of Marxist and socialist feminist traditions of Canadian labour history.<sup>28</sup> Inspired by E.P. Thompson's revitalization of Marxist theory, in the mid-1970s, several Canadian labour historians took up his call to reassert the relevance of class to the writing of history.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, they created a new analytical framework through which to view the events of the past. Thus, Marxist historians began to not only study a variety of historical actors, events, and relations that previous generations of

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<sup>28</sup> Until the 1960s, Canadian labour history was largely written by people examining industrial relations or social democratic political parties. Although these early historians differed from one another in some important ways, they all studied the history of labour within a narrow analytical framework that saw "class consciousness and class conflict...as problems to be solved rather than as areas to be understood." Leier, "W[h]ither Labour History," 63. For examples of these types of early Canadian labour histories, see Harold A. Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada, Their Development and Functioning* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1948); Stuart Jamieson, *Industrial Relations in Canada* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957); Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959); Stuart Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-66* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1968); David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974); A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

<sup>29</sup> Spearheaded by such scholars as Gregory Kealey and Bryan Palmer, this new Marxist historiography made the study of society's class relations their primary focus and called for an examination of the "totality of working-class experience." Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto: Butterworth & Co., 1983), 3. Palmer revised and reprinted this book nine years later as Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart Inc., 1992). Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* and Kealey's *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* were two of the first books to put the new Marxist thought into practice. Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979); Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). In the American context, see Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class History* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

Canadian labour historians had either omitted or overlooked but also to re-evaluate previous analyses of labour history and to reinterpret history of all kinds by putting the working class front and centre.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, although many feminists moved away from socialist theories after their initial forays into Marxist thought in the 1970s, throughout the 1980s, socialist feminists continued to theorize about the relationship between gender and class.<sup>31</sup> By the 1990s, socialist feminists were arguing that capitalism and patriarchy are intricately connected.<sup>32</sup>

Building on the theoretical contributions of Marxists and socialist feminists, my thesis explores SORWUC as an important historical example of the ways in which class and gender intersect in practice. Knowing that unionization would secure better wages

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<sup>30</sup> The emergence of the Marxist school and its historical revision of Canadian history stirred a great deal of discussion amongst Canadian historians. A fierce and well-documented debate occurred between two groups of Canadian labour historians in particular, with the first generation of labour historians arguing against what they perceived to be an “ideological invasion” of Canadian labour history by a younger generation of Marxists like Kealey and Palmer. For a brief summary of this debate by someone not directly involved, see Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing Since 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 306-307. For accounts by some of the scholars involved in the debate, see Gregory S. Kealey, “Labour and Working-Class History in Canada: Prospects for the 1980s,” *Labour/Le Travailleur* 7 (Spring 1981): 67-94; David J. Bercuson, “Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Essay on the New Labour History and Working-Class Culture in Recent Canadian Historical Writing,” *Labour/Le Travailleur* 7 (Spring 1981): 95-112; Kenneth McNaught, “E.P. Thompson vs. Harold Logan: Writing About Labour and the Left,” in *Contemporary Approaches to Canadian History*, ed. Carl Berger (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1987), 143-164; Greg Kealey, “Writing About Labour,” in *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History*, ed. John Schultz (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1990), 145-174.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Heather Jon Maroney, “Feminism at Work,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 141 (September-October 1983): 51-71; Jane Lewis, “The Debate on Sex and Class,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 149 (January-February 1985): 108-120; Kathryn Harriss, “New Alliances: Socialist-Feminism in the Eighties,” *Feminist Review* 31 (1989): 34-54; Linda Briskin, “Identity Politics and the Hierarchy of Oppression: A Comment,” *Feminist Review* 35 (Summer 1990): 102-108. For an example of this thinking in the context of Canadian labour and working class history in particular, see Bettina Bradbury, “Women’s History and Working Class History,” *Labour/Le Travail* 19 (Spring 1987): 23-43.

<sup>32</sup> Briskin, “Identity Politics and the Hierarchy of Oppression,” 104. Over the last two decades, socialist feminist historians have produced many important historical studies of women that consider gender but still emphasize the importance of class as a category of historical analysis. See, for example, Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Pamela Sugiman, *Labour’s Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-1979* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Sangster, *Earning Respect*; Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

and working conditions for women but frustrated by the Canadian labour movement's reluctance to organize workers in unorganized industries, in 1972, several working women took matters into their own hands and formed SORWUC: "a union whose main objective was to organize the unorganized."<sup>33</sup> Grounded in socialist feminist principles, SORWUC's leadership remained conscious of the exploitative nature of capitalist class relations and, more importantly, worked to organize workers across such social divisions as race, gender, and skill. Throughout the union's existence, SORWUC organized employees of different gender and racial groupings in a variety of unorganized industries, including banks, offices, bars, restaurants, daycare centres, and retail shops—the very people and industries that many traditional trade unions said could not be organized.

That SORWUC achieved even limited success speaks to the potential of socialist feminist unionism as a framework for organizing unorganized workers. However, that the existing literature on SORWUC examines the union briefly and only in relation to gender significantly limits our understanding of it as a trade union.<sup>34</sup> Thus, to highlight SORWUC's important contributions to the history of labour organizing in Canada, this thesis examines it as a case study of a socialist feminist union committed to organizing unorganized workers. The following chapters will explore SORWUC's role in Canadian labour history in general and its efforts to organize unorganized workers in particular. Chapter 2 will look at the formation of SORWUC as an independent, grassroots, socialist feminist union in the context of a constrained labour movement and a reinvigorated

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<sup>33</sup> The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> The current British Columbia Labour Relations Code defines a trade union as an "organization or association of employees...that has as ones of its purposes the regulation...of relations between employers and employees through collective bargaining." "Labour Relations Code," *British Columbia Labour Relations Board*, [http://www.bclaws.ca/Recon/document/freeside/--%201%20--/labour%20relations%20code%20%20rsbc%201996%20%20c.%20244/00\\_96244\\_01.xml#section1](http://www.bclaws.ca/Recon/document/freeside/--%201%20--/labour%20relations%20code%20%20rsbc%201996%20%20c.%20244/00_96244_01.xml#section1).

women's movement. Chapter 3 will focus on SORWUC's efforts to organize workers in the service industry specifically, examining the union's strikes at a pub and a restaurant. The central thesis of this work is that SORWUC's socialist feminist unionism and commitment to organizing unorganized workers positioned the union as radically different from much of the 1970s Canadian labour movement, and that this difference both helped and hindered the union in its work to organize the unorganized. By examining SORWUC from this neglected perspective, my work ultimately aims to demonstrate SORWUC's importance to the historiography of class and labour organizing in Canada.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This thesis draws on a variety of primary and secondary source materials related to SORWUC and its history. Although I was in contact with several former SORWUC members, I ultimately decided not to conduct interviews. While oral history can provide invaluable information on individual historical actors' experiences of an event or organization, the purpose of my project was to examine how and why SORWUC differed from much of the Canadian labour movement and how these differences shaped the union's efforts to organize the unorganized. Collecting and analyzing the oral histories of the people who comprised SORWUC and participated in the union's struggle to organize unorganized workers in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s is a different albeit equally important project but one that is outside the scope of this thesis.

## CHAPTER 2: AN “ENTIRELY DIFFERENT” KIND OF UNION

In 1976, a Canada Labour Relations Board (CLRB) officer remarked, SORWUC “is entirely different....I think they see themselves differently too—as an instrument of social reform rather than a bread and butter union.”<sup>1</sup> A closer examination of SORWUC’s origins, establishment, and early activities demonstrates that SORWUC was indeed an “entirely different” kind of union. This chapter begins with a discussion of SORWUC’s socialist feminist roots, tracing SORWUC’s development from a university-based women’s caucus to a full-fledged labour union to show how socialist feminism shaped the structure and activity of the union. The second half of the chapter looks at SORWUC’s structure and some of the union’s early organizing efforts to demonstrate how and why SORWUC differed from other unions.

SORWUC was a response to the successes and failures of the 1970s Canadian labour movement. In the years immediately after the Second World War, the Canadian labour movement entered a period of growth and prosperity. In response to the wartime increase in union militancy, in the 1940s, the federal government negotiated a “postwar settlement” between labour and capital.<sup>2</sup> In exchange for labour leaders’ acceptance of significant legal restrictions on workers’ ability to strike and control their working conditions, the government passed legislation to aid union organizing, create labour

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<sup>1</sup> “Women waving red flag of unionism under banks’ noses,” *The Province*, 13 November 1976.

<sup>2</sup> See Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers’ Collective Action in Canada, 1900-1948* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2001).

relations boards, and increase wages.<sup>3</sup> The result was a substantial increase in union membership and an improved standard of living for many workers. As historian Craig Heron explains, “By the 1950s, it seemed that many Canadian workers had never had it so good.”<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the “peace and prosperity” experienced by the Canadian labour movement during the 1940s and 1950s was neither far-reaching nor long lasting. The labour gains made during the postwar period largely excluded women workers in particular, as a male breadwinner ideology that viewed men’s labour as the primary source of family income continued to shape Canadians’ ideas about work and gender. This resulted in labour legislation that was highly gendered and thereby failed to address the specific issues and needs of women workers.<sup>5</sup> In addition, by the late 1960s, whatever postwar peace had existed had largely ended. Fuelled by the barrage of American culture and increasing opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam, a growing sense of anti-Americanism and a correlating Canadian nationalism permeated Canadian society in the 1960s. In regards to labour, this new nationalism manifested in a rejection of the international unionism that had dominated the Canadian labour movement for much of the twentieth century. The result was a further splintering of an already fragmented

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<sup>3</sup> See Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Consent to Coercion Revisited* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1988); Aaron McCrorie, “PC 1003: Labour, Capital, and the State,” in *Labour Gains, Labour Pains: Fifty Years of PC 1003*, eds. Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips, and Jesse Vorst (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 1995), 15-38; Peter S. McNinnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Brief History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1996), 85.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on how gender norms shaped labour legislation in the postwar period, see Anne Forrest, “Securing the Male Breadwinner: A Feminist Interpretation of PC 1003,” in *Labour Gains, Labour Pains*, 139-162; Ann Porter, *Gendered States: Women, Unemployment Insurance, and the Political Economy of the Welfare State in Canada, 1945-1997* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

Canadian labour movement, as a number of Canadian unions broke away from their American counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

Facing these challenges was a labour leadership increasingly constrained by the new postwar labour legislation. In addition to limiting the right to strike, this legislation restricted the number and types of issues over which unions could exercise control.<sup>7</sup>

While the legislation established frameworks for dealing with such important processes as union certification and grievance arbitration, it placed the responsibility for administration of these processes in the hands of the newly created federal and provincial labour relations boards. In doing so, the legislation “promoted a form of legalism in which workers’ rights were regarded as flowing from the collective agreement and not from their role in the social relations of production.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, during the 1950s and 1960s, many labour leaders moved away from direct action and labour activism and towards business unionism, focusing their efforts on a narrow range of issues, including

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<sup>6</sup> In 1969, Madeleine Parent and Kent Rowley worked to establish the Council of Canadian Unions (CCU) as a democratic, independent labour organization free from American influence. Several Canadian locals broke away from their international unions to join the CCU. Although locals’ decisions to split from international unions were undoubtedly influenced by the nationalism of the time, poor servicing and undemocratic practices in the international unions were also important factors. In 1973, the CCU was renamed the Confederation of Canadian Unions. For more information on the formation of the CCU, see Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart Inc., 1992), 318-320; Desmond Morton, *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 277.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the ways in which postwar labour legislation restricted unions, see Panitch and Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*; Fudge and Tucker, *Labour Before the Law*; McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation*; Larry Haiven, “PC 1003 and the (Non)Right to Strike: A Sorry Legacy,” in *Labour Gains, Labour Pains*, 215-235.

<sup>8</sup> Fudge and Tucker, *Labour Before the Law*, 279.

union administration, collective bargaining, and grievances.<sup>9</sup> The shift in union aims and activities led to a shift in union leadership, as “a different kind of union leader from that of a militant organizer was needed to be effective in this system [of bureaucratic postwar labour relations].”<sup>10</sup>

Along with a change in leadership, the Canadian labour movement also experienced a change in membership. This change was largely the result of the growth of the public sector and the increased labour force participation of such previously excluded groups as immigrants and women.<sup>11</sup> Although women had always comprised a significant part of the paid labour force, during the postwar period their numbers increased substantially. Between 1941 and 1971, the number of women working for wages jumped from 832,000 to over three million.<sup>12</sup> Whereas in 1941 women comprised approximately 19 per cent of the paid labour force, by 1971 this figure had nearly doubled.<sup>13</sup> During this time, more than half of employed women worked as typists, sales

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<sup>9</sup> As historian Alvin Finkel explains, in the decades following the end of the Second World War, “the trade union movement moved quickly away from a wartime flirtation with radical ideas of transforming social relations of production and gender relations. It made its peace with capitalism and focused both on winning benefits for its members through collective bargaining and benefits for all working people through an expansion of state social insurance and social service programs.” Alvin Finkel, “Trade Unions and the Welfare State in Canada, 1945-90,” in *Labour Gains, Labour Pains*, 65. See also Errol Black and Jim Silver, *Building a Better World: An Introduction to Trade Unionism in Canada* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 111-112.

<sup>10</sup> Fudge and Tucker, *Labour Before the Law*, 304. As historian Craig Heron explains, more positively, “Successful union leaders within this [the postwar labour relations] framework had the skills to negotiate with employers, to lobby with state officials and politicians, and to manage the politics within their own organizations.” Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, 89.

<sup>11</sup> In the postwar period, Canada experienced a massive wave of immigration, with over two million immigrants arriving in Canada between 1946 and 1961. Although immigrants had always participated in the Canadian labour force, in the past many immigrants ended up working as independent farmers. In contrast, in the 1950s, almost ninety per cent of new immigrants became wagedworkers, with over seventy per cent in the production, service, and recreation sectors. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, 305-306.

<sup>12</sup> Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour*, 325.

<sup>13</sup> In 1971, women comprised 34.6 per cent of the paid labour force. Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women & Their Segregated Work* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart Inc., 1994), 16.

clerks, babysitters, maids, teachers, tailoresses, waitresses, nurses, telephone operators, and janitors.<sup>14</sup> Within these occupational categories, women, most of whom had been excluded from the postwar settlement, were often employed part-time, paid low wages, and had little job security.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the significant increase in the number of women working for wages, women remained under-represented in unions. As historian Bryan Palmer explains, “The record of women and unions in the immediate pre-1975 years is...one of unmistakable advances and distressing continuities.”<sup>16</sup> Although the rate of unionization amongst women workers increased between 1966 and 1976, this increase was largely the result of the unionization of civil service workers.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, aside from the organization of civil service workers, the Canadian labour movement’s organizing efforts in the 1960s were limited and rarely included workers employed in predominantly female industries.<sup>18</sup> As in decades past, the Canadian labour movement’s inability or unwillingness to organize in unorganized sectors was justified in a variety of ways, including the part-time nature of the jobs in question, the high employee turnover rates, and the small size of the potential

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<sup>14</sup> Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, 33. The language used to describe female occupations reflects the occupational classifications listed in the 1961 census as well as the 1971 Occupation Classification Manual. For more information on occupational classifications, see Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> For example, in 1971, 19.7 per cent of women worked part-time compared to just 5.0 per cent of men. Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, 50-51. For a comprehensive statistical analysis of women’s paid employment during this period, see Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, 14-76.

<sup>16</sup> Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour*, 333.

<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s, civil service workers at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels unionized en masse. This resulted in the creation of some of Canada’s largest unions, including the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in 1963 and the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) in 1966. Women comprised a substantial number of these civil service workers. For example, in 1976, 41 per cent of CUPE’s 220,000 members were women. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, 332. For more information on the unionization of civil service workers in Canada during this period, see Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, 320-325; Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, 94-98; Morton, *Working People*, 255-269

<sup>18</sup> Between 1955 and 1965, the percentage of unionized workers in Canada dropped from 33.7 per cent to 29.7 per cent. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, 301-302.

bargaining units.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the causes, the unionization rate of women workers continued to lag behind that of their male counterparts. By the early 1970s, 43 per cent of male workers belonged to unions compared to just 27 per cent of women workers.<sup>20</sup>

SORWUC formed within this context of challenge and change in the early 1970s, a product of a constrained labour movement and a strong Women's Liberation Movement. A "second wave" women's movement emerged in the 1960s, due in part to the experiences of female activists in the student organizations of the New Left.<sup>21</sup> Specifically, as female student activists became increasingly aware of the gender inequality that permeated much of the New Left, they began to question women's role within both the movement and society. When their male counterparts reacted with hostility and derision, some of these women decided to form independent women's groups or caucuses. Within these groups, women engaged in consciousness-raising, a

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<sup>19</sup> For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the predominantly male Canadian labour movement showed limited and sporadic support for women workers. Although historians have pointed out that male unionists' ideas about women and work during this time period were more complicated than is sometimes assumed, for the most part, male members of the Canadian labour movement often utilized the view of women's labour as unskilled, temporary, or part-time to argue that women should not or could not be organized. For further discussion of the historical bias of men against organizing women, see Joan Sangster, "The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike: Organizing Women Workers," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978): 109-130; Ruth Frager, "No Proper Deal: Women Workers and the Canadian Labour Movement, 1870-1940," in *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement*, eds. Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1983), 44-64; Gillian Creese, *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class, and Race in a White-Collar Union, 1944-1994* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1999); Meg Luxton, "Feminism as a Class Act: Working-Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail* 48 (Fall 2001): 63-88.

<sup>20</sup> Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, 332.

<sup>21</sup> Collectively referred to as "the New Left," during the 1950s and 1960s, a number of new social movements formed and began to mount a significant challenge to society. For example, the peace movement called for nuclear disarmament and an end to war and imperialism, while the United States Civil Rights Movement lobbied for African-American rights and an end to segregation. Although many of the new social movements originated far from university campuses, university students quickly became an integral part of these movements, with many students forming their own student-based organizations. For more information on the New Left, see *The New Left: Legacy and Continuity*, ed. Dimitrios Roussopoulos (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 2007). For information on the New Left in the Canadian context, see Myrna Kostash, *Long Way from Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1980); Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

newly devised form of feminist organizing whereby small groups of women met to discuss issues of importance to them. Although many of the initial groups formed on university campuses, many quickly moved off campus in an effort to reach more women.<sup>22</sup>

SORWUC was part of this process. In September 1968, the Women's Caucus at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, British Columbia was formed.<sup>23</sup> Made up of students, staff, and faculty, according to one of its founding members, the Caucus represented "a convergence of several inter-related groups of women who had become concerned with their place in the student political organizations, as well as in the world at large."<sup>24</sup> While the group was first active in university affairs, the growing political

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<sup>22</sup> By the late 1960s, the Women's Liberation Movement had become a significant force for social change focused on achieving economic and social equality. For example, on 16 February 1967, in response to feminist lobbying, Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson instituted the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. The Commission spent six months investigating issues and matters pertaining to the status of women, and eventually produced a 488-page report with 167 recommendations for improving the status of women in Canada. For more information on the Commission's report, see Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970). Throughout the 1970s, feminists worked together to take action on a number of issues, including reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, sexual harassment, and sexual violence. By the late 1980s, feminists had secured a number of important victories in the ongoing struggle to eradicate gender inequality in Canada, including the creation of women's centres on university campuses and in communities across Canada; the establishment of Women's Studies as a legitimate academic field; the federal government's passage of Bill C-62 addressing affirmative action for women, visible minorities, and the disabled; and the Supreme Court ruling that struck down the federal abortion law as unconstitutional. For more information on the Women's Liberation Movement in Canada, see Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret MacPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988); Nancy Adamson, "Feminists, Libbers, Lefties, and Radicals: The Emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement," in *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980*, ed. Joy Parr (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 252-280.

<sup>23</sup> "Women's Caucus," *The Peak*, 18 September 1968.

<sup>24</sup> Marcy Toms as quoted in Francis Jane Wasserlein, "'An Arrow Aimed at the Heart': The Vancouver Women's Caucus and the Abortion Campaign, 1969-1971" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1990), 56.

turmoil at SFU made it difficult to maintain their focus on women's issues.<sup>25</sup> In addition, many of the members wished to expand their focus to the broader community of non-university women.<sup>26</sup> In July 1969, the SFU Women's Caucus moved to Vancouver and renamed itself the Vancouver Women's Caucus.

The change in location brought a change in membership and focus. Specifically, as the number of non-university members increased, various interest groups developed within the Caucus.<sup>27</sup> The Working Women's Workshop (WWW) was one such group. Formed in January 1970 as a discussion group for working women, the WWW was the socialist feminist wing of the Caucus. The group met twice each month to discuss issues faced by individual women in their particular places of work, as well as issues affecting all working women. In addition, the WWW conducted leafleting campaigns aimed at office workers and supported women workers' efforts to achieve justice in the workplace.<sup>28</sup> The WWW picketed alongside striking rental car company employees at the Vancouver airport and helped hospital employees in their fight to win equal pay for

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<sup>25</sup> 1968 and 1969 were tumultuous years at SFU; several significant events occurred at the university during this time, including the occupation of the Board of Governors' room in November 1968 and the strike by students and faculty of the Politics, Sociology & Anthropology Department in Fall 1969. For more information on the political turmoil at SFU during this time, see Dionysios Rossi, "Mountaintop Mayhem: Simon Fraser University, 1965-1971," (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2003); Hugh Johnston, *Radical Campus: Making Simon Fraser University* (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Wasserlein, "'An Arrow Aimed at the Heart,'" 56.

<sup>27</sup> While people often discuss the Women's Liberation Movement as one movement, it actually consisted of a number of different groups and organizations, sometimes working together and sometimes not. The main distinction between these individual groups and organizations was theoretical, with the majority of groups subscribing to liberal feminism, radical feminism, or socialist feminism. For a brief overview of liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism, see Adamson, Briskin, and MacPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change*, 61-71.

<sup>28</sup> "Working women organize," *The Pedestal*, April 1970.

equal work at Vancouver General Hospital and within the Hospital Employees Union.<sup>29</sup> The WWW also organized a boycott of Cunningham Drugs to support striking women workers trying to achieve their first contract at C.H. Hosken, a subsidiary of Cunningham, and worked to garner public support for twenty-eight women on strike at Sandringham Private Hospital in Victoria, British Columbia.<sup>30</sup>

Supporting the struggles of working women to organize or negotiate fair contracts led some WWW members to become “interested in the trade unions and why they didn’t do much for women.”<sup>31</sup> Unionization appeared the best way for women workers to attain better wages and working conditions; however, the existing unions seemed neither interested nor willing to organize unorganized industries with predominantly female employees. As a result, the WWW began to consider the possibility of forming a women’s labour union. The July-August 1970 edition of *The Pedestal*, the official publication of the Vancouver Women’s Caucus, included an article calling for the establishment of an independent union dedicated to organizing all working women:

The organization of working women must be a major long-term task of the women’s liberation movement....The proposal is for an organization of working women, registered as a union so that it can fight for union

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<sup>29</sup> In 1969, Office and Technical Employees Union (OTEU), Local 378 organized 55 workers employed by three car rental companies at the Vancouver airport—Tilden, Hertz, and Avis. Frustrated by management’s refusal to bargain in good faith, in February 1970, the employees went on strike. For more information on the strike and the WWW’s participation in it, see “On strike,” *The Pedestal*, April 1970; “Strike escalates: Rent-a-car workers fight for contract, equal pay,” *The Pedestal*, June 1970. For more information on the hospital employees struggle to win equal pay at work and in their union, see the many articles published in *The Pedestal* between Fall 1969 and July-August 1970.

<sup>30</sup> Between 1970 and 1971, eight women employed by C.H. Hosken (now Shoppers Drug Mart) and unionized with the Retail, Wholesale & Department Store Union waged a lengthy strike for a first contract. For more information on the strike and the WWW’s participation in it, see the many articles published in *The Pedestal* between September 1970 and May 1971. Also in 1970, 28 workers (mostly nurse’s aids) at Sandringham Private Hospital went on strike for a first contract. For more information on the Sandringham strike and the WWW’s participation in it, see the articles published in *The Pedestal* between May 1971 and April 1972.

<sup>31</sup> Honorée Newcombe, “Coming Up From Down Under: A Hopeful History of AUCE,” in *AUCE & TSSU: Memoirs of a Feminist Union, 1972-1993* (Burnaby: Teaching Support Staff Union Publishing, 1994), 4. Note: This article originally appeared in SFU’s student newspaper, *The Peak*, in the 1970s.

agreements in specific work places, but much more flexible than existing trade unions.... This kind of organization could bring together the different kinds of work we do with women workers. Groups of women fighting within unions to make them responsive to the needs of women members could be brought together with women attempting to organize unorganized offices, stores, etc. Most important, our educational work would be immediately related to action; to the possibility of organizing and actually winning victories.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, an article in the October 1970 edition of *The Pedestal* elaborated on this proposal, arguing that:

The role of unions in defending the wages and working conditions of their members is important. But the needs of workers—particularly women workers—cannot be met within those limits.... Because their objectives are limited to wages and working conditions, even those few unions that have won equal pay for women have failed to fight for equal job opportunity so that equal pay becomes meaningless.... The needs of women workers will be met only through our own independent action; through a movement which does not accept the limitations of the existing system.<sup>33</sup>

Although the WWW never established an independent union, several of its members continued to champion the idea of creating a union for working women. When the Vancouver Women's Caucus disbanded the following year, these members formed a new organization dedicated to the establishment of an independent women's union—the Working Women's Association (WWA).<sup>34</sup>

Over the next few years, the WWA was actively involved in issues regarding women and work in British Columbia: conducting educational activities, doing strike support, and encouraging women's organizing efforts. As part of its educational work,

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<sup>32</sup> "A proposal for organizing: Working women's union," *The Pedestal*, July-August 1970. Although originally the official publication of the Vancouver Women's Caucus, when the Caucus disbanded in July 1971, *The Pedestal* continued to exist as an independent publication. "The old crumbles...and so did the new," *The Pedestal*, August/September 1971.

<sup>33</sup> "Canadian unions: A debate," *The Pedestal*, December 1970.

<sup>34</sup> "The old crumbles...and so did the new," *The Pedestal*, August/September 1971; "Union," *The Pedestal*, October 1971. The WWA was formed at a conference held on 30 October 1971. "Working Women's Association," *The Pedestal*, December 1971.

the WWA produced information on “the situation of women workers and the importance, and necessity of organizing.”<sup>35</sup> In a 1972 article on the need to organize working women,

WWA member and future SORWUC national president Jean Rands wrote:

Our goal must be to convince more and more working women of the possibility and necessity of struggle, and of basic women’s liberation ideas, and to convince women’s liberationists of the necessity of union organizing—not as an end in itself, but as an essential defense against the arbitrary power of the employer, and as the beginning of collective action in the area where we as women have our real collective strength—at work.<sup>36</sup>

In pursuit of this goal, the WWA distributed information on a variety of issues relating to women and work, including unemployment insurance, equal pay, job security, childcare, and federal and provincial labour laws. In the spring of 1972, the WWA even held a series of seminars on union organizing, including “sessions on labour law, writing constitutions, bargaining, strike tactics, etc.”<sup>37</sup> These seminars provided WWA members with the basic knowledge of union organization that would enable them to form SORWUC later that year.

In addition to its educational activities, WWA members also supported striking women workers and encouraged women’s organizing efforts in unorganized industries. The WWA was involved in union drives at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and several restaurants, including Smitty’s Pancake House, Pizza Patio, and Denny’s.<sup>38</sup> On these occasions, the WWA assisted workers’ drives to unionize with such established unions as the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) and the Office and

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<sup>35</sup> Jean Rands, “Toward an Organization of Working Women,” in *Women Unite! An Anthology of the Canadian Women’s Movement*, eds. Bonnie Campbell et al. (Toronto: Canadian Women’s Educational Press, 1972), 147.

<sup>36</sup> Rands, “Toward an Organization of Working Women,” 147.

<sup>37</sup> Newcombe, “Coming Up From Down Under,” 4.

<sup>38</sup> The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers (SORWUC)* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1979), 10.

Technical Employees' Union (OTEU) or workers' efforts to form their own unions, as occurred at UBC when clerical workers, dissatisfied with OTEU, formed their own union—the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE).

The experience of these organizing drives confirmed WWA members' belief that “the existing unions were not prepared to undertake the kind of fight that would be required to organize unorganized industries.”<sup>39</sup> For example, in December 1971, HERE received certification at the Fir and Broadway location of Smitty's Pancake House in Vancouver. Despite management harassment and attempts to hinder negotiations and get rid of the union, Smitty's workers eventually signed a first contract; however, the female waitresses who had instigated the organizing drive complained that they were pressured to sign the less than ideal contract by the male union leadership who largely ignored their needs during negotiations.<sup>40</sup> At UBC, clerical workers attempted to organize with OTEU in the spring of 1972, but their assessment of the OTEU's constitution as “undemocratic,” combined with workers' frustrating experiences dealing with the union leadership, ultimately led them to form their own union later that year—AUCE.<sup>41</sup> SORWUC member Heather MacNeil summarized these experiences:

A number of women had frustrating experiences with existing unions, such as seeking help to organize a small restaurant and being told the unit was too small to bother, or a union sending in a male organizer with slick campaign material to tell the women how they should organize an office. We concluded that the traditional unions were either not able or not willing to organize women workers.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 10. For more information on the situations at Pizza Patio, UBC, Smitty's, and Denny's, see the articles published in *The Pedestal* between December 1971 and April 1973.

<sup>40</sup> “Smitty's drags its feet,” *The Pedestal*, March 1972.

<sup>41</sup> “UBC: ‘Our own union!’” *The Pedestal*, April 1972.

<sup>42</sup> “Small B.C. union busy organizing women bank workers,” *Toronto Globe & Mail*, 20 December 1977.

In short, WWA members concluded that if working women were to be organized, they would have to do it themselves. Having learned about union organizing at the WWA seminar series held earlier that year, in the fall of 1972, WWA members decided to “take the next step and form their own union.”<sup>43</sup> On 22 October 1972, twenty-five women held a convention in Vancouver and formed SORWUC: an independent socialist feminist union dedicated to organizing the unorganized.<sup>44</sup>

At a time when the Canadian labour movement was either unable or unwilling to mount large organizing drives in unorganized industries, SORWUC’s establishment as a union devoted to this purpose, combined with the union’s socialist feminist roots, meant it differed markedly, in both theory and practice, from much of the mainstream labour movement. As a result of the constraining labour legislation enacted in the immediate postwar period, by the 1970s, many union leaders had come to view “their main business as the narrow range of issues covered by collective bargaining (and not excluded by management rights clauses); these issues generally concerned wages and benefits. Larger political and social questions had little place in union affairs.”<sup>45</sup>

In contrast, SORWUC’s founders saw unionization as fundamentally linked to larger political and social questions. For example, a particularly contentious issue at the time was that of equal pay for equal work. In 1970, working women earned 60 per cent

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<sup>43</sup> Helen Potrebenco; “Working for Women Working;” University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections (hereafter UBCL-RBSC); Service, Office, and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC) fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-6.

<sup>44</sup> The sources differ slightly on the exact date of and the number of people who attended SORWUC’s founding convention. The two dates most often cited are 23 October and 24 October; however, the majority of sources also indicate that the convention was held on a Sunday and Sunday’s date would have been 22 October. As for the number of attendees, several sources state that there were twenty-five women in attendance while others say twenty-four. Given that the differences are relatively minor and bear little significance for this thesis, I settled on twenty-five women attending the founding convention held on 22 October 1972.

<sup>45</sup> Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, 89.

of the wages of their male counterparts. By 1980, this number had risen only slightly to 64 per cent.<sup>46</sup> Although many unions bargained for clauses that would address the issue of equal pay for equal work, such policies frequently failed to address the broader social inequality faced by women outside the workplace. As a result, policies intended to end pay inequity often resulted in a further entrenchment of the wage gap between men and women. A future SORWUC member explained:

We cannot win even immediate demands unless we are prepared to go beyond them....Experience shows that where this demand [equal pay for equal work] is won *as a single issue* the companies often just stop hiring women. This struggle can only be won by a movement that sees women's oppression *as a totality*, that sees the fight for equal pay as only one part of the battle that also includes the fight against discrimination in hiring, for free day care, and against the dehumanization of women into sex objects.<sup>47</sup>

In short, SORWUC argued that to address the issue of unequal wages, unions must broaden their focus to include the systemic inequality outside the narrow range of issues traditionally covered by collective agreements. As such, SORWUC's constitution stated that "within the community, the Union [SORWUC] will work for the establishment of political and social equality, for free parent-controlled child care centres, for community control of schools, for community health services, and against price and rent increases which erode the gains made through collective bargaining."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, a 1978

SORWUC draft proposal on childcare stated:

As a union for working women SORWUC has a responsibility to use their policy on child care to encourage government, unions, employers and the public to accept their responsibility in this area. Vehicles such as publicity, lobbying, contract demands and collective agreements can be used to this

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<sup>46</sup> Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> "A proposal for organizing: Working women's union," *The Pedestal*, July-August 1970. Original emphasis.

<sup>48</sup> "Constitution of The Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (S.O.R.W.U.C.);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC funds; Box 1, Folder 1-1.

end. SORWUC must attempt to bring to Unionism collective agreements which reflect the interrelationship of working and living conditions.<sup>49</sup>

For SORWUC, unions were a crucial tool in the struggle to effect political and social change.

SORWUC's theoretical differences with the Canadian labour movement translated into differences in practice as well. In contrast to the bureaucratic and predominantly male unions, SORWUC was an independent grassroots union committed to democracy and equality. These principles played a key role in the structure of the union. For example, in emphasizing democracy, SORWUC's founders sought to avoid the top-down organization prevalent in many of the big national unions following business unionism. As in other grassroots union movements, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), SORWUC's founding members wanted to ensure that control of the union remained in the hands of an active membership.<sup>50</sup> One SORWUC pamphlet argued, "We [SORWUC members] don't need professional negotiators or business agents. As workers on the job and in the union we can talk for ourselves.... We don't want trade union bureaucrats who haven't been on the job for ten years to be telling us what our needs are!"<sup>51</sup> The fear was that bureaucratic union officials would fail to adequately address workers needs or support workers' decisions if not in the best interest

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<sup>49</sup> "To the Local 1 Conference;" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-1.

<sup>50</sup> SORWUC members often referred to the IWW as a prime example of a radical union on which to base their own. For example, in an article published two years before the formation of SORWUC, WWW members argued, "The IWW looked beyond the immediate needs for shorter hours and higher pay, to see a society where the workers would enjoy the results of their own labor. Their experience provides valuable lessons even today, particularly for women workers who are still unorganized, underpaid and underemployed. The kind of solidarity they developed among thousands of workers is an example for us, as we attempt to deal with the way women are pitted against one another in this society." "Wobblies," *The Pedestal*, October 1970. Similarly, an article printed in a 1983 SORWUC newsletter described the IWW as "one of the most idealistic, principled workers' movements in the history of labor." "SORWUC National Newsletter (February 1983);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-1.

<sup>51</sup> "Join SORWUC: Service, Office & Retail Workers Union of Canada: An Independent Union Dedicated to Organizing Working Women;" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 5, Folder 5-8.

of the national or international union. Members of SORWUC and its sister union AUCE explained:

When the highly-paid male business agent who has never done clerical work in his life negotiates a contract for low-paid female clerical workers, is it likely that he will effectively represent their concerns, or even understand them? Is it likely, if they reject the deal he has negotiated, that he will recommend to the regional and national union executives (also well-paid, mostly male professionals) that strike funds be released to those workers?<sup>52</sup>

To foster democracy and member participation, SORWUC's founders structured the union so that, in theory, SORWUC members would negotiate their own contracts and make all the decisions relating to their particular unit. SORWUC member Heather MacNeil explained, "The local bargaining units decide what they want in a contract and then they negotiate for it. Union officials won't even meet with an employer unless the employees are present. The union will give advice and share information from past organizing experiences, but it is up to the members to do the actual organizing and bargaining."<sup>53</sup> In short, a democratic union would allow individual locals and bargaining units the freedom to address their specific wants and needs, and ideally result in contracts that reflected the needs and demands of the particular locals that negotiated them.

To provide greater protection against the development of a union bureaucracy, SORWUC's executive officer positions were filled by election instead of appointment and the majority were unpaid. While the union initially had no paid positions, as the organizing gained momentum and the workload increased, the union established a limited number of paid positions, such as the office coordinator for Local 1, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice-

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<sup>52</sup> Jackie Ainsworth et al., "Getting Organized...in the Feminist Unions," in *Still Ain't Satisfied! Canadian Feminism Today*, eds. Maureen Fitzgerald et al. (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982), 140.

<sup>53</sup> "Small B.C. union busy organizing women bank workers," *Toronto Globe & Mail*, 20 December 1977.

President of Local 1, and a number of organizers at the national and local level.

However, the membership voted on any changes relating to union positions and pay, and paid positions were still elected by the membership, from the membership.<sup>54</sup> As a final precaution against bureaucratization, no paid officer could receive a salary greater than the highest wage in the bargaining units and no person could hold a paid position for longer than one year.

Instead of a permanent paid staff, the functioning of SORWUC was heavily dependent on volunteer labour, mostly that of members at large: members of the union who were not part of an individual bargaining unit. An article in a 1981 SORWUC newsletter explained:

SORWUC is the only union with members at large as active participants. Members at large are what make SORWUC a union run by volunteers. No other union has the resources to take on the massive job of new organizing. The CLC [Canadian Labour Congress] with its million dollars cannot match the potential of SORWUC's volunteers. Members at large hand out leaflets and meet with people at any workplace who are interested in joining the union. Most of the office and clerical work required is done by members at large. Much of the picketing and all of the picket scheduling has been done by members at large.<sup>55</sup>

Most of these members at large were people who had previously been members of bargaining units, were trying to organize their own workplace, or just wanted to work in the union office.<sup>56</sup> Thus, in contrast to many other Canadian unions staffed by paid

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<sup>54</sup> SORWUC members established the first paid position in February 1977, when members of Local 2 decided, through referendum vote, to hire a full-time office coordinator, subject to review after six months. The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 22.

<sup>55</sup> "SORWUC Local 1 Newsletter (September 1981);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-2. The CLC is a national labour organization that represents workers through affiliated unions, provincial and territorial labour federations, and district labour councils.

<sup>56</sup> "SORWUC Local 1 Newsletter (September 1981);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-2.

officers, SORWUC was a grassroots organization largely run by active non-salaried members.

Another key principle in SORWUC was equality—equality in pay, between jobs, in union leadership roles, and in all aspects of work and society. One of the first sections of SORWUC’s constitution stated that:

The Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada believes that everyone who works should earn enough to provide a decent living for her/himself and her/his family. To this end, the Union will bargain collectively on behalf of the members to bring about fair wage standards, to reduce the difference between the lowest and highest rates, and to assure equal pay for comparable work for all, regardless of sex, age, marital status, race, sexual preference, religion or national origin.

The Union will strive to improve working conditions of members, to maximise the opportunities for personal fulfillment in the work situation of all members, and to reduce working hours and eliminate overtime so that each member may have the opportunity of enjoying proper leisure, recreation and cultural development. The Union will work to ensure job security for all members and to end discrimination in hiring and promotion.<sup>57</sup>

Given SORWUC’s commitment to organizing in unorganized industries with predominantly female workforces, the union paid particular attention to the issue of gender equality. This focus reflected a growing concern over gender inequality during this period in society in general and within the Canadian labour movement in particular. Although the number of women trade unionists increased dramatically during the 1960s, women remained underrepresented in leadership positions in the labour movement and continued to battle for the right to speak at union meetings and to have their issues addressed fairly and fully in meetings and collective agreements. As a result of their efforts, in the 1970s and 1980s, many unions established women’s caucuses and passed

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<sup>57</sup> “Constitution of The Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (S.O.R.W.U.C.);” UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 1, Folder 1-1.

resolutions that addressed issues relating to gender inequality, including pay equity and harassment.<sup>58</sup>

While the establishment of women's caucuses and the inclusion of clauses requiring equal pay for equal work were undoubtedly steps in the right direction, SORWUC took a much more radical approach to gender inequality, arguing that gender oppression is rooted in class inequality. As one SORWUC member wrote, "Complete women's liberation and complete social equality can only become a reality when we put an end to our economic inferiority. The fight to end economic deprivation can be fought, to a large extent, through collective action, through unions."<sup>59</sup> For SORWUC, organizing unorganized workers was a fundamental part of the fight to end social inequality:

It is in the interests of working people to join together and negotiate the value of our labour collectively, this is what unions are all about. Right now, men's labour is considered more valuable than women's because more of them are organized. Our work is not inherently less valuable or less skilled—it is merely unorganized.<sup>60</sup>

A third principle of SORWUC was union independence. Given SORWUC's founding members' decision to form a new union based on their frustrating experiences dealing with various unions and labour organizations within the existing labour movement, SORWUC was established as an independent union and remained so until it

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<sup>58</sup> For more information on women's organizing in unions, see *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy*, eds. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Pamela Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-1979* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); Dennis A. Deslippe, *"Rights, Not Roses": Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945-80* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Luxton, "Feminism as a Class Act;" Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). For more information on women and unions in British Columbia specifically, see Betty Griffin and Susan Lockhart, *Their Own History: Women's Contribution to the Labour Movement of British Columbia* (New Westminster, BC: United Fisherman & Allied Workers' Union/CAW Seniors Club, 2002), 151-200; Creese, *Contracting Masculinity*.

<sup>59</sup> "S.O.R.W.U.C. News (October 1980);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-1.

<sup>60</sup> "S.O.R.W.U.C. News (October 1980);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-1.

disbanded in 1986.<sup>61</sup> This meant SORWUC did not have formal relationships with any of the national, provincial or municipal labour organizations, such as the CLC, the British Columbia Federation of Labour or the Vancouver & District Labour Council. Still, unlike many other independent and radical unions, SORWUC maintained more or less friendly relations with unions and individuals within the labour movement. Several prominent Canadian trade unionists gave their time and expertise to help with the establishment of SORWUC and the union often received donations from other unions to support its efforts to organize unorganized workers.<sup>62</sup> A similar relationship existed between SORWUC and the women's movement. Due to SORWUC's roots in the Vancouver Women's Caucus, the union had always had strong ties to local feminist organizations. While SORWUC's relationship with these groups generally focused on issues relating to women and work, the union often collaborated with them on issues and events of importance to all women, including International Women's Day celebrations and efforts to achieve legislative reform.<sup>63</sup>

The structure of SORWUC clearly differed from that of many other Canadian unions; however, who and where it organized were what really set it apart. Although formed to organize all unorganized workers, in light of SORWUC's socialist feminist

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<sup>61</sup> Helen Potrebenko, "Working for Women Working;" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-6.

<sup>62</sup> For example, at a 1972 WWA-sponsored seminar on unions, Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical, and Allied Workers (CAIMAW) member Jess Succamore spoke about setting up a union; Pulp and Paper Workers member Fred Mullin discussed the difficulties of obtaining certification from the British Columbia Labour Relations Board (BCLRB); and AUCE member Lori Whitehead shared her experience establishing a union at UBC. "Unions," *The Pedestal*, October 1972. In regards to donations, SORWUC newsletters often listed recent donations received from members of the labour movement, including AUCE, CAIMAW, and CUPE. For more information on union donations to SORWUC, see The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 25. See also SORWUC newsletters; UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Boxes 6 and 9.

<sup>63</sup> SORWUC records contain many letters to and from various women's organizations, including Concerned Citizens for Choice on Abortion, The Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes, and Vancouver Status of Women. See UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 1, Folders 1-2 to 1-6.

roots and the failure of the Canadian labour movement to organize women workers, the union focused on organizing in predominantly female industries, such as the service sector.<sup>64</sup> The service sector has historically had limited or non-existent levels of unionization. While many civil service workers unionized in the 1960s and 1970s, unions have been unable to gain much ground in the private service sector. In 1975, the rate of unionization in the entire private sector was just 26 per cent.<sup>65</sup> By 1989, the unionization rate in the three private sector industries of trade, finance, and business and personal services was 15 per cent or less.<sup>66</sup> The reasons for the low levels of unionization are many, including the limited number of employees typically employed in service sector workplaces, the part-time and temporary nature of the work, employer opposition, and legislation not designed to aid the type of organizing required to unionize in the private sector.<sup>67</sup>

Yet it was precisely because of the historically low levels of unionization in the service industry that SORWUC tried to organize these workers. Thus, following the establishment of SORWUC, union members quickly began work on the union's fundamental goal of organizing the unorganized. In July 1973, the union won its first certification at the Legal Services Commission, a small private legal office in Vancouver. The following year, SORWUC received certification to represent ten employees at

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<sup>64</sup> In 1970s British Columbia, the majority of employed women worked in the service sector. John Douglas Belshaw and David J. Mitchell, "The Economy Since the Great War," in *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia*, ed. Hugh J. M. Johnston (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996), 318; Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 324.

<sup>65</sup> Julie White, *Sisters & Solidarity: Women and Unions in Canada* (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 1993), 161.

<sup>66</sup> White, *Sisters & Solidarity*, 163.

<sup>67</sup> White, *Sisters & Solidarity*, 167-182.

Transition House, a shelter for female survivors of domestic abuse.<sup>68</sup> Buoyed by these initial victories, over the next two years, SORWUC organized fourteen other bargaining units in offices, social service facilities, and daycare centres.

SORWUC achieved a number of important victories in regards to organizing unorganized workers. A major obstacle to unionization in the service sector has been, and continues to be, the small number of employees in each workplace. While many unions were either unable or unwilling to organize small groups of employees, deeming the possible financial cost and amount of work involved too great for such a limited gain, SORWUC knew that organizing small bargaining units was an important part of achieving the union's goal of organizing all unorganized workers. In May 1975, SORWUC organized Canada's only single-person bargaining unit when they received certification at Volunteer Grandparents Society, a non-profit organization that matches people of grand-parenting age with children without grandparents.<sup>69</sup> Helen Potrebenko, the sole employee at Volunteer Grandparents Society, initially applied for certification with six other unions; however, all six turned her down due to the small size of the potential bargaining unit: "One fellow said it would be suicide for a one-person union to be certified. He told me the Canadian Labor [sic] Congress wouldn't allow less than 10 people in a bargaining unit."<sup>70</sup> Given the reluctance of other unions to tackle the important issue of organizing workplaces with small numbers of employees, SORWUC's

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<sup>68</sup> "SORWUC Local 1 Newsletter (October 1977); UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-2.

<sup>69</sup> "One-woman bargaining unit seeks 'unanimity' in local," *The Vancouver Sun*, 14 May 1975. SORWUC held the certification at Volunteer Grandparents Society until July 1979, when the unionized employee quit and the new employee voted to decertify. "One-member union office decertifies," *The Vancouver Sun*, 2 August 1979.

<sup>70</sup> "One-woman bargaining unit seeks 'unanimity' in local," *The Vancouver Sun*, 14 May 1975.

work in this area positioned the union in stark contrast to much of the mainstream labour movement.

While SORWUC did a great deal of work in regards to organizing unorganized workers in several sectors, the union received the most attention for its highly publicized drive to organize bank workers.<sup>71</sup> Prior to SORWUC's efforts, attempts to organize bank workers in Canada had been limited and rarely met with success.<sup>72</sup> Further, in 1959, the CLRB rejected an application for certification for a small bank branch in Kitimat, British Columbia, ruling that an individual bank branch was not an appropriate bargaining unit. For the next seventeen years, banks and unions often cited this ruling as evidence that bank workers could not unionize unless they did so as a nation-wide unit. Determined to organize all unorganized workers, including bank workers, in 1977, SORWUC successfully challenged the 1959 CLRB ruling when the union received certification to represent workers at a Vancouver branch of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. In response to SORWUC's application, the CLRB ruled that "the single branch location of the Commerce encompasses employees within a community of interest and is an appropriate bargaining unit."<sup>73</sup> The CLRB's decision on SORWUC's application ultimately paved the way for SORWUC's 23 bank certifications obtained in 1977, as well

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<sup>71</sup> As SORWUC members have written their own detailed history of the struggle to organize bank workers, here I offer only a brief overview of the bank drive. For more information on SORWUC and the banks, see The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*.

<sup>72</sup> "Chartered banks must finally face union certification," *The Georgia Straight*, 19 August 1976.

<sup>73</sup> CLRB ruling as cited in The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*, 52.

as the establishment later that year of the CLC's drive to organize bank workers into the new CLC-sponsored Union of Banking Employees.<sup>74</sup>

By the late 1970s, SORWUC had grown immensely from its modest roots as the socialist feminist wing of the Vancouver Women's Caucus. In 1978, the union held 41 certifications at a variety of workplaces, including a university student society and several banks, credit unions, daycare centres, retail stores, and restaurants—workplaces that the Canadian labour movement had failed to organize or else not even tried.<sup>75</sup> Many SORWUC members attributed this growth to the union's participatory and grassroots style, a fundamental aspect of SORWUC that distinguished it from much of the mainstream labour movement. As one member of the SORWUC executive explained in 1978, "The women we talk to are interested primarily in two things about unions: will they have to go on strike and will they have to do what union officials tell them to do. If SORWUC was like most other unions and set the rules for members, we'd never convince them to join."<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, as this chapter has shown, SORWUC differed from other Canadian unions in many important ways. Formed in the context of a burgeoning women's

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<sup>74</sup> Although the CLRB decision recognized the right of Canadian bank workers to organize on a branch-by-branch basis, the banks put up a powerful fight, resulting in a number of lengthy and costly court battles. Struggling to pay the legal bills, SORWUC appealed to the CLC for funds. Although not an affiliate, SORWUC and the CLC had maintained civil relations, with CLC affiliates often contributing time and money to SORWUC's organizing efforts. SORWUC had not—and never would—become a CLC affiliate, as the CLC repeatedly stated that in order for SORWUC to affiliate the union must agree to disband and transfer its bargaining units to other industry-specific unions within the CLC. Given that SORWUC was formed as an alternative to the bureaucratic and male-centred unions dominant in the CLC, and that many SORWUC members had joined the union for this very reason, many people within the union felt that it would be undemocratic to hand SORWUC bargaining units over to other unions. Still, the CLC responded to SORWUC's request by demanding that the union become an affiliate. When SORWUC refused to become an affiliate, the CLC denied the union's request for financial support and instead launched its own organizing campaign in the banks. For more information on the clash between SORWUC and the CLC over the banks, see The Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle*.

<sup>75</sup> "A heresy whose time has come: B.C. working women unite," *Ottawa Citizen*, 23 January 1978.

<sup>76</sup> "Small B.C. union is busy organizing women bank workers," *Toronto Globe & Mail*, 20 December 1977.

movement and a constrained labour movement, SORWUC's founders established the union as an independent grassroots socialist feminist labour union dedicated to organizing in industries where the Canadian labour movement could not or would not go. At a time when unions had become increasingly focused on such immediate concerns as wages and union administration, SORWUC sought to organize all unorganized workers as part of the union's broader struggle to end class and gender inequality. To return to the comments of the CLRB officer cited at the beginning of this chapter, SORWUC was thus "entirely different" from much of the 1970s Canadian labour movement. This difference in theory and practice ultimately resulted in significant gains for SORWUC members in particular—in the form of better wages and working conditions—and Canadian workers in general—in the unionization of workers in unorganized industries. Thus, as unions attempt to meet the challenges of the service economy today, they might learn much from SORWUC and its alternative approach to unionization.

Yet while SORWUC's differences from the mainstream labour movement allowed it to make important advances in regards to the organization of unorganized workers, its differences in structure and strategy also presented the union with unique challenges. Specifically, in attempting to organize workers in largely unorganized industries, SORWUC encountered substantial obstacles in the form of obstinate employers, unethical unions, and negligent labour relations boards. The remainder of this thesis will examine these challenges in the context of the union's organizing in a restaurant and a pub—then, as now, particularly difficult workplaces to organize.

## **CHAPTER 3: “FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT TO ORGANIZE”**

In the early 1980s, Service, Office, and Retail Workers’ Union of Canada (SORWUC) member Helen Potrebenko wrote an article on the history of SORWUC and issues of importance to the union. Entitled “Our Right to Organize?” the article gives a brief overview of the union’s frustrating experiences organizing in unorganized industries:

In 1972, we saw that the established unions were not interested in our problems and decided to organize ourselves. We would form structures which we controlled ourselves; we would win wages which would begin to recognize both our needs and our skills.

But everywhere we have been and everything we have done gets bogged down in the battle for the basic right to organize. We thought we were going to organize and negotiate. We have found ourselves fighting over and over again for the right to organize. Maybe we should have set this as our original goal but you never win more than you aim for. You often win less than you aimed for and in spite of the comprehensive goals we set for ourselves, we have spent years fighting for the right to organize.<sup>1</sup>

Potrebenko’s comments highlighted a common problem experienced by workers and unionists who attempt to organize in unorganized industries. Although labour laws have legalized unions and some workers’ right to join them, often times these workers must still fight for the right to unionize. Compounded by a number of other adverse factors common in unorganized industries, including hostile employers and high employee

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<sup>1</sup> [Title of source unclear]; UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-2.

turnover, this situation makes organizing unorganized workers an extremely difficult task, one that the Canadian labour movement continues to struggle with today.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, the historically low rates of unionization in industries like the service industry were precisely why SORWUC made a concerted effort to organize such sectors; organizing in unorganized industries was the very reason for SORWUC's existence and what made the union "entirely different" from much of the Canadian labour movement. To understand how these differences played out on the ground and to illustrate the difficulties of organizing in the service sector, this chapter will examine SORWUC's campaigns to organize workers at Bimini neighbourhood pub and Muckamuck restaurant, both of which resulted in bitter and protracted strikes. It argues that although SORWUC's radical approach to unionization was a crucial factor in these strikes, it could not counter the powerful role of the state in labour relations.

Although Bimini was a pub and Muckamuck a restaurant, both types of establishments had historically low levels of unionization and a high concentration of poorly paid female employees. In 1971, women accounted for nearly 83 per cent of waiters, hostesses, and stewards.<sup>3</sup> In these positions, women earned 66 per cent of their male counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Given SORWUC's commitment to organizing in unorganized industries with predominantly female employees, between 1972 and 1986, SORWUC

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<sup>2</sup> Julie White, "Patterns of Unionization," in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy*, eds. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 191-206; Julie White, *Sisters & Solidarity: Women and Unions in Canada* (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 1993); Errol Black and Jim Silver, *Building a Better World: An Introduction to Trade Unionism in Canada* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 176-181.

<sup>3</sup> Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women & Their Segregated Work* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart Inc., 1994), 36.

<sup>4</sup> By 1980, this number had risen slightly, with women working as food and beverage service workers earning 69.4 per cent of the income of their male counterparts. Looking at all occupations, in 1970, women earned 59.5 per cent of men's income; in 1980, they earned 63.8 per cent. Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, 43.

successfully organized workers at several British Columbia food and beverage establishments, including Bimini, Cat's Meow, Muckamuck, Jerry's Cove, and three outlets of Church's Chicken.<sup>5</sup>

Bimini was SORWUC's first certification in the food and beverage industry. Located at 2010 West 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue in the Kitsilano neighbourhood of Vancouver, Bimini was typical of many other small bars and restaurants in the city. Privately owned by then-president of the British Columbia Pub Owners' Association Peter Uram, the pub employed approximately twenty full-time and part-time workers, including bartenders, bar porters, doormen, and waitresses.<sup>6</sup> For the most part, jobs were divided along gender lines, with men working as bar staff and doormen and women employed as waitresses. As in other industries, an unequal pay scale for male and female workers accompanied the gendered division of labour. For example, when the workers contacted SORWUC, waitresses earned between \$3.00 and \$3.75 per hour while bartenders received between \$4.50 and \$6.50 per hour.<sup>7</sup> The gendered pay scale at Bimini was consistent with the rest of the restaurant industry.<sup>8</sup> Several waitresses stated that "owner Peter Uram told them

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<sup>5</sup> In 1982, SORWUC established a Restaurant Workers Organizing Committee; however, aside from a few newsletter announcements and leaflets targeting restaurant workers, I was unable to find any additional information about the activities of this committee. "SORWUC Local 1 Newsletter (October 1982); UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-1.

<sup>6</sup> Since the 1970s, many gendered terms like "waitress" have been replaced by more politically correct and gender neutral terms like "server;" however, in order to remain consistent with the language used by the Bimini workers themselves, I have chosen to use "waitress."

<sup>7</sup> The minimum wage in British Columbia in 1977 was \$3.00 an hour.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on gender, wages, and the Canadian restaurant industry, see footnote #4. Although unionization does not necessarily result in the eradication of gender-based wage rates, it appears to ease the gap and at least provides workers with a mechanism (collective bargaining) through which to negotiate more equal rates of pay. For more information on unions, gender, and equal pay, see White, *Sisters & Solidarity*; Rosemary Warskett, "Can a Disappearing Pie be Shared Equally? Unions, Women, and Wage 'Fairness'," in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy*, eds. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 249-265; Margaret Hallock, "Unions and the Gender Wage Gap," in *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership*, ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1993), 27-42.

he'd had to offer a man that much because 'men won't take less.'"<sup>9</sup> According to the waitresses, Uram further justified paying women less by claiming that, unlike bartenders, waitresses earned approximately \$5.00 an hour in tips.<sup>10</sup> Bimini waitresses complained that this figure was a gross over estimation of the tips they actually earned; waitress Lynn Pare Cyr stated that in a full eight-hour shift, she rarely received even so much as \$15.<sup>11</sup> In addition to overestimating the actual amount earned in tips, Bimini waitresses insisted that Uram's comments also ignored "kickbacks," a practice common in the restaurant industry even today whereby servers must pay out a percentage of their tips to other staff members.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to paltry and unequal wages, Bimini workers also faced a number of other issues. They had no seniority rights, no medical or dental benefits, and no allowance for sick leave or leaves of absence. Workers also had no say in scheduling and no protection from arbitrary changes in scheduling. As SORWUC president Jean Rands explained, in addition to being extremely inconvenient, "these changes in scheduling resulted in inability to work...for instance, an employee scheduled to work a shift when child care was unavailable."<sup>13</sup> Workers also complained about favouritism and harassment in the workplace; workers who were "in" with management would receive

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<sup>9</sup> "Bimini strikers fighting for respect," *The Georgia Straight*, 27 October 1977.

<sup>10</sup> "Bartenders' union gives in to Bimini workers," *The Province*, 30 November 1977.

<sup>11</sup> "Bartenders' union gives in to Bimini workers," *The Province*, 30 November 1977.

<sup>12</sup> A 1977 newspaper article described kickbacks as a "common practice [in the restaurant industry]. It involves paying percentages of your tips to other staff such as the maitre d', the hostess, the busboy, the cook, the barmen, etc. It often amounts to 10-20% to each one. Clearly, this is a subsidy to the employer, serving to keep those workers' wages down. Management also frequently demands a percentage as a 'guarantee' to keep the job. These insidious practices are extremely widespread. Because it is only illegal for the employer to deduct from an employee's wages directly, the employer can fiddle with the tips any way s/he pleases." "The unpaid work of waitressing," *Kinesis*, June 1977. Original emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> "SORWUK [*sic*] head contacting bank workers," *Kamloops Daily Standard*, 19 January 1978.

raises, while others spent months working for the same low wage.<sup>14</sup> Management even refused to comply with such basic legislated employment standards as statutory holiday pay.<sup>15</sup>

Fed up with the lousy working conditions, in 1976, some of the Bimini workers decided to unionize. After contacting several unions, they finally settled on SORWUC. While the small size of the potential bargaining unit likely meant that few unions were interested in organizing them, the Bimini workers made it clear that SORWUC's unique structure and approach greatly shaped their decision. Spokesperson for the striking Bimini workers Margot Holmes explained: SORWUC "prevents a bureaucracy from developing, and it's small and Canadian, so we didn't feel overwhelmed. And they let us do the organizing."<sup>16</sup> SORWUC received certification at Bimini from the British Columbia Labour Relations Board (BCLRB) on 24 January 1977 and shortly thereafter, began negotiating with owner Peter Uram.

From the outset of negotiations, relations between management and the union were tense. As one employee explained, "Since [...certification], life at the pub has been sheer hell."<sup>17</sup> Working conditions for pro-union employees deteriorated significantly, as they were suspended, fired, or harassed into quitting, while anti-union employees received raises and preferred schedules. One waitress told a local reporter, "One of the barporters was fired, supposedly because she was 'too short'; we think it was because she was pro-union. Then a pro-union woman came back from holidays to find out she hadn't

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<sup>14</sup> "Bimini workers win contract: SORWUC victory!" *Kinesis*, January 1978.

<sup>15</sup> "Bimini strikers fighting for respect," *The Georgia Straight*, 27 October 1977.

<sup>16</sup> "Small B.C. union is busy organizing women bank workers," *Toronto Globe & Mail*, 20 December 1977. This article attributes this quote to "Margaret Holmes;" however, in writing about the Bimini strike, several other newspaper articles cite "Margot Holmes." For consistency, I use the latter.

<sup>17</sup> "Bimini picketers 'labor landmark'," *The Ubysey*, 20 October 1977.

been scheduled. Some people were getting raises and others weren't."<sup>18</sup> Waitress Dianne Richards explained that management harassment, combined with the fact that she had not received a wage increase after ten months of employment, contributed to her decision to quit Bimini: "Things at Bimini's were becoming unbelievably intolerable...The day finally came when there was just too much harassment and abuse. I said to myself, 'I don't need anymore of this bullshit' and quit."<sup>19</sup> In response to management's behaviour, SORWUC filed six charges of unfair labour practice with the BCLRB. In two cases, the Board ruled in favour of SORWUC, forcing Uram to pay half of one employee's salary for the period she was suspended and to reinstate another.<sup>20</sup>

The tense working atmosphere reflected the tough negotiations. The main issues for the Bimini workers were wages and control over working conditions. Union members wanted waitresses' hourly wage increased to \$4.50, but Uram offered only \$3.75.<sup>21</sup> Union members also wanted seniority rights, clear grievance and discipline procedures, and shift schedules posted in advance.<sup>22</sup> Another point of contention between SORWUC members and management was the closed shop, a clause that would require every employee to join the union and pay union dues. For unions, a closed shop is crucial to maintaining union security, as it guarantees union membership and provides steady income from dues.<sup>23</sup> As SORWUC members explained, "The tactic of the employer has been to keep the staff divided with promises for some and discrimination

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<sup>18</sup> "Bimini strikers fighting for respect," *The Georgia Straight*, 27 October 1977.

<sup>19</sup> "Bimini picketers 'labor landmark'," *The Ubyyssey*, 20 October 1977; "Pub workers tote placards instead of beer at Bimini," *The Vancouver Sun*, 21 October 1977.

<sup>20</sup> "Bimini picketers 'labor landmark'," *The Ubyyssey*, 20 October 1977.

<sup>21</sup> "Strike hurts Bimini business," *The Ubyyssey*, 21 October 1977.

<sup>22</sup> "Union could be expelled," *The Vancouver Sun*, 29 November 1977.

<sup>23</sup> Black and Silver, *Building a Better World*, 25.

against others. If we are to work as a team again, the union cannot be used to separate us.”<sup>24</sup> Uram, however, firmly opposed the closed shop.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, after only a few rounds of negotiations, it became clear that Uram had no real interest in negotiating with the union. SORWUC spokesperson Pat Barter complained that Uram “refused to negotiate a basic union contract.”<sup>26</sup> Negotiations finally broke down in the summer when Uram refused to make himself available for talks; employees realized that he was not willing to negotiate. As Bimini worker Barbara Owen explained, “We were negotiating in good faith, until Peter Uram, the owner, suddenly became unavailable during the summer....After a two-month wait, we received a one-page letter from Uram stating that seniority would be based on merit, which was something the union could not accept.”<sup>27</sup> In October, after ten months of failed negotiations, the union held a strike vote; the results were 13 to 7 in favour of a strike. At 9 a.m. on Thursday, 20 October 1977, Bimini workers erected a picket line in front of the pub and, in doing so, became the first pub workers to go on strike in the history of British Columbia.<sup>28</sup>

SORWUC’s differences from much of the Canadian labour movement shaped many aspects of the strike, both positively and negatively. One of the most significant differences was support on the picket line from other SORWUC members and people from the broader community, including the local labour and women’s movements; the Bimini strike lasted ten weeks and during this time, the picket line not only stayed strong

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<sup>24</sup> “Bimini strike,” *Kinesis*, December 1977.

<sup>25</sup> “Picket cuts pub business in half,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 October 1977; “Bimini strike,” *Kinesis*, December 1977.

<sup>26</sup> “Pub workers tote placards instead of beer at Bimini,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 21 October 1977.

<sup>27</sup> “Bimini picketers ‘labor landmark’,” *The Ubyyssey*, 20 October 1977.

<sup>28</sup> “Bimini picketers ‘labor landmark’,” *The Ubyyssey*, 20 October 1977.

but also remained significantly larger than the bargaining unit's actual numbers. On the first day of the strike, fourteen pickets began marching at 9 a.m. in front of the pub and in the back alley; by evening, there were thirty pickets, including Bimini workers, SORWUC officials, and supporters.<sup>29</sup> The second night of the strike saw 85 pickets marching in front of the pub.<sup>30</sup> As a workplace that employed only twenty people, such numbers indicated broad support for SORWUC from the community. SORWUC spokesperson Pat Barter explained:

We've had support on the picket lines from women's groups, from locals of the Hospital Employees Union, the IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers], and CBRT [Canadian Brotherhood of Railway and Transport Workers] Seaman's [*sic*] section, and others. We have also had strong support from the local community and Bimini patrons. 95 per cent have refused to cross our line.<sup>31</sup>

This support continued into November, with one of the most significant actions taking place on 19 November when 180 SORWUC members and supporters took to the streets surrounding Bimini to march in support of the striking pub workers.<sup>32</sup> The event included speeches by members of SORWUC and its sister union, the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE).<sup>33</sup> Off the picket line, local artists Persimmon Blackbridge and Sima Elizabeth Shefrim made a quilt to commemorate the strike, while the University of British Columbia (UBC) student newspaper ran sympathetic editorials, arguing that "the Bimini dispute should be of great interest to

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<sup>29</sup> "Pub workers tote placards instead of beer at Bimini," *The Vancouver Sun*, 21 October 1977.

<sup>30</sup> "Bimini strikers fighting for respect," *The Georgia Straight*, 27 October 1977. For the sake of comparison, the bargaining unit at Bimini consisted of twenty employees, seven of which had crossed the picket line to continue working.

<sup>31</sup> "Bimini strikers fighting for respect," *The Georgia Straight*, 27 October 1977.

<sup>32</sup> "Unionists' march backs pub workers," *The Vancouver Sun*, 21 November 1977.

<sup>33</sup> "Bimini strike," *Kinesis*, December 1977.

students and deserves our support.”<sup>34</sup> The benefits of SORWUC’s grassroots unionism and ties to the community were thus evident throughout the strike, as supporters consistently rallied around the striking Bimini workers. Indeed, it is unlikely the strike would have lasted ten weeks without the support from the local community and other SORWUC members.

Despite the outpouring of support from the public and the labour movement, not everyone stood in solidarity with SORWUC. Although business dropped significantly, the pub remained open throughout the strike, staffed by management, anti-union employees, and scabs. In addition, the union suspected that the British Columbia Pub Owners’ Association was financing Uram during the strike as part of the association’s larger plan of keeping unions out of British Columbia pubs.<sup>35</sup> In an effort to draw customers to the pub, Uram distributed leaflets across Vancouver’s west side, offering discounts and explaining his side of the strike.<sup>36</sup> Although many patrons refused to cross the picket line, some did. The result was a tense picket line where management and their allies often harassed SORWUC members and supporters. After observing the picket line one evening, one reporter noted that “verbal intimidation has been part of the picket line experience. Last Friday night I watched management supporters survey the picket line. I heard them decide that all the women on the line were (a.) unattractive, and (b.) dykes or ‘lesboes.’”<sup>37</sup> On another occasion, after patronizing the pub, a group of UBC engineering students began harassing the picketers. A SORWUC member explained, “After meeting

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<sup>34</sup> “About the Bimini quilt,” *Kinesis*, January 1978; “Women progress with union,” *The Ubysey*, 21 October 1977.

<sup>35</sup> “Pub owners finance strikebreaker,” *The Ubysey*, 28 October 1977. I was unable to confirm or refute this claim.

<sup>36</sup> “‘Vulgar’ gears disrupt Bimini pickets,” *The Ubysey*, 8 November 1977.

<sup>37</sup> “Bimini strikers fighting for respect,” *The Georgia Straight*, 27 October 1977.

at Bimini's for drinks, they became quite rowdy....They tried to harass us (the picketers). Supposedly, they wanted to break up the picket line, and they did some pretty disgusting things to do so."<sup>38</sup> Through it all, SORWUC members and supporters continued to picket the pub.

If SORWUC's radical approach to unionization helped in the organization of the Bimini workers and the maintenance of a strong picket line, it hindered the union in other ways, as the union's feminist politics and independent status presented it with several unique challenges. In late November, as the strike neared the one-month mark, Local 40 of the Hotel, Restaurant, Culinary Workers, and Bartenders' Union (Local 40) applied to the BCLRB for certification at Bimini. In doing so, Local 40 was raiding SORWUC, and worse, doing so with scab labour in the midst of a strike.

SORWUC's status as an independent union played a key role in Local 40's raid of the Bimini bargaining unit. Specifically, Local 40 representatives argued that because SORWUC was not an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), SORWUC did not have the right to organize workers in the restaurant industry, an area Local 40 considered to be "their field." Local 40 spokesperson Ron Bonar explained, "We believe we have agreements of longstanding record in the industry and we don't recognize SORWUC as having jurisdiction."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in explaining why Local 40 had applied for certification, another Local 40 spokesperson, John Phillips, claimed that SORWUC was trespassing on Local 40's territory: "That's our field....It's been our field since 1900; we've been successful and we intend to continue to be successful because we're a monopoly....We're not going to tolerate another organization in our field. We're going

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<sup>38</sup> "Vulgar' gears disrupt Bimini pickets," *The Ubysey*, 8 November 1977. Original parentheses.

<sup>39</sup> "Union now fights union in Bimini pub strike," *The Vancouver Sun*, 26 November 1977.

to stop them every way we can.”<sup>40</sup> In short, according to Local 40, because SORWUC was an independent union not affiliated with the CLC, Local 40 did not have to respect SORWUC’s certification or picket line.

In justifying Local 40’s actions by pointing to SORWUC’s status as an unaffiliated union, Local 40 spokespeople referred to an issue that has long divided the labour movement—jurisdiction. To avoid dual unionism—“two unions fighting for membership in a single jurisdiction”—labour organizations such as the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the CLC have historically tried to divide industries up, assigning one member union to each industry.<sup>41</sup> However, because these organizations can only penalize affiliates, their ability to compel non-affiliate unions to comply with jurisdictional boundaries is limited. The result can range from unpleasant tension—with unions jockeying for control over industries and members—to disaster—as at Bimini where, in an effort to maintain jurisdictional control, one union was undermining another union’s efforts to win a collective agreement.

SORWUC immediately condemned Local 40’s actions, accusing the union of strike-breaking and signing up scabs. SORWUC spokesperson Pat Barter contended that in order for Local 40 to make their application for certification, “they had to go behind our picket lines at the pub and sign up the scabs. We think this action is an intolerable display of trade union disunity.”<sup>42</sup> She further stated, “It’s incredible that one trade union is actively raiding another while it’s out on strike....If the application is allowed, it will

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<sup>40</sup> “Inter-union battle shaping over Bimini,” *The Province*, 26 November 1977.

<sup>41</sup> Desmond Morton, *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 58.

<sup>42</sup> “Inter-union battle shaping over Bimini,” *The Province*, 26 November 1977.

create a precedent amounting to ‘open season’ on unions....Any union that goes on strike will be raided by another.”<sup>43</sup> In response to Local 40’s claim that SORWUC was trespassing on its territory, spokesperson for the Bimini workers Margot Holmes replied, “They claim that [they] have had jurisdiction since 1900, which means that they’ve had 77 years to organize women. And where were they?”<sup>44</sup> For SORWUC, organizing unorganized workers was of greater importance than maintaining the arbitrary jurisdictional boundaries of unions that were doing little to organize unorganized women workers.

The actions of Local 40 also drew an angry response from many members of the British Columbia labour movement. Jess Succamore, spokesperson for the Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical, and Allied Workers (CAIMAW)—an independent, socialist Canadian union that, at the time, was facing its own issues with a large international union, the United Steelworkers of America, over the unionization of workers in the British Columbia mining industry—insisted that Local 40’s action represented “one of the most vile acts in the trade union movement....It amounts to [...Local 40] saying that unless the workers are organized by an affiliated union, it is better for them to remain unorganized.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Jack Munro, regional president of the International Woodworkers of America—a largely male union that had traditionally been quite militant but had become quite conservative since the late 1940s—stated, “The lowest form of humanity that exists is a scab, and how any so-called respectable trade

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<sup>43</sup> “Hotel union asks certification at strike-bound Bimini pub,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 25 November 1977.

<sup>44</sup> “Small B.C. union is busy organizing women bank workers,” *Toronto Globe & Mail*, 20 December 1977.

<sup>45</sup> “Union now fights union in Bimini pub strike,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 26 November 1977.

union can go and even talk to them, never mind sign them up, is a complete and total disgrace....They (Local 40) are acting as traitors to the trade union movement.”<sup>46</sup>

SORWUC responded promptly to Local 40’s raid. One of its first actions was to ask the British Columbia Federation of Labour to censure Local 40.<sup>47</sup> Although SORWUC was not an affiliate of the Federation, Local 40 was and affiliates who did not adhere to the Federation’s constitution risked suspension or expulsion. Specifically, the Federation could consider Local 40’s decision to raid SORWUC during a strike a violation of the Federation’s provision that affiliates “take no part in any action that would assist an employer in a strike situation.”<sup>48</sup> SORWUC also applied more direct pressure to Local 40 by demonstrating outside Local 40’s head office in Burnaby. On 25 November, forty-five SORWUC members and supporters picketed Local 40’s offices in the pouring rain, chanting, “Don’t raid. Organize.”<sup>49</sup> SORWUC spokesperson Pat Barter told the media, “There are hundreds of thousands of unorganized people in Canada....It’s incredible that a trade union can be so jealous of its territory that it would jeopardize

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<sup>46</sup> “Bimini strike sets ‘scabs’ talk: Union effort a ‘disgrace’,” *The Province*, 28 November 1977. Original parentheses. The raid on Bimini was not the first time Local 40’s ethics had come into question nor would it be the last. For more information on corruption in Local 40 prior to the 1970s, see Jeremy Milloy, “Fast Food Alienation: Service Work and Unionism in British Columbia, 1968-1998” (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2007). Since the 1970s, Local 40 has dealt with a great deal of internal strife. Beginning in 1982, the international union placed Local 40 under trusteeship for three years. Shortly after the conclusion of the trusteeship, in 1985, Local 40 member George Hotra launched a lawsuit against Local 40, president-elect Ron Bonar, the international union, and international vice-president and previously appointed trustee James Stamos, over alleged violations of the union’s constitution and by-laws. “Voting Irregularities alleged in union trial,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 23 March 1987; “Hotel union back in court over local’s elections,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 9 December 1987; “Court refuses supervised balloting,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 4 February 1988. Most recently, in 2005, the international union again placed Local 40 (now called UNITE!-HERE Local 40) under trusteeship, and in 2008, while still under trusteeship, a new trustee was sent up from San Francisco after members alleging election tampering launched legal action and an audit revealed serious financial irregularities. “Hotel workers’ union finances in a mess,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 7 March 2008; “San Francisco labour leader sent to help troubled Vancouver hotel workers union,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 12 July 2008.

<sup>47</sup> The British Columbia Federation of Labour is a provincial labour body that represents workers through affiliated unions and is itself affiliated to the CLC.

<sup>48</sup> “Union could be expelled,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 29 November 1977.

<sup>49</sup> “Union now fights union in Bimini pub strike,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 26 November 1977.

these employees' attempt to win living wages and decent working conditions."<sup>50</sup> Barter's concern that Local 40's actions would threaten the strike at Bimini proved correct when, shortly after news broke of Local 40's certification application, Uram demanded that SORWUC remove their Bimini picket line until the certification issue was resolved. SORWUC refused and the picket line remained.<sup>51</sup>

Pressure and support for SORWUC quickly paid off. Only one week after submitting the certification application to the BCLRB, Local 40 withdrew it. The announcement came shortly after a meeting between Local 40 and Federation officials. In a press conference, Federation secretary-treasurer Len Guy stated that Local 40 "has agreed to remove all obstacles created in their attempt to organize what is their historic and established jurisdiction over bartending," and that "the Federation is pleased SORWUC can now get on with the business of fighting an anti-union employer to obtain a fair settlement for [Bimini] employees."<sup>52</sup> Although Local 40 vice-president Glen Morgan denied that the Federation had threatened the local with expulsion, he did concede that the union faced "pressures. There just was no alternative. If there had [been] no picket line, it would have been alright. It was really a bad scene, and an error on our part to even apply for certification."<sup>53</sup> That the Federation's support for SORWUC was not unconditional was evidenced by Guy's warning that "a union which has enjoyed historic jurisdiction over bartending will continue to fight to maintain that jurisdiction should further inroads be attempted in the future."<sup>54</sup> In short, had Local 40 not raided Bimini in the midst of a strike or had the raid not received so much media

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<sup>50</sup> "Union now fights union in Bimini pub strike," *The Vancouver Sun*, 26 November 1977.

<sup>51</sup> "Bimini owner wants picket line removed," *The Province*, 29 November 1977.

<sup>52</sup> "Bartenders' union 'hurt negotiations'," *The Ubyyssey*, 2 December 1977.

<sup>53</sup> "Bartenders' union gives in to Bimini strikers," *The Province*, 30 November 1977.

<sup>54</sup> "Bartenders' union 'hurt negotiations'," *The Ubyyssey*, 2 December 1977.

attention and support from other members of the labour movement, it is unlikely the Federation would have taken SORWUC's side.

The raid over, SORWUC members continued to picket Bimini in an effort to force management to settle. Their efforts finally paid off when, on 30 December 1977, SORWUC and management agreed to a contract addressing most matters, and to binding arbitration on the remaining issues, including wages and workers' contributions to the medical plan.<sup>55</sup> On 13 January 1978, provincial mediator Ed Sims handed down the Bimini workers' first collective agreement. The agreement included a modified union shop, two weeks paid vacation, and a provision for up to two weeks of unpaid leave.<sup>56</sup> Wages, too, were substantially improved. The head bartender's wage increased from \$5.03 per hour to \$6.44 per hour, while permanent waitresses' wages rose from \$3.75 per hour to about \$5.00 per hour.<sup>57</sup> While the Bimini workers did not win all of their demands, they felt satisfied with their first contract. Spokesperson for the striking Bimini workers Margot Holmes explained, "Any first contract is a victory....And this is a very good first contract."<sup>58</sup> SORWUC members working at Bimini looked forward to dealing with the outstanding issues during the next round of negotiations.

Unfortunately, the next round of negotiations would never occur. While SORWUC's radical approach to unionization helped the union throughout the Bimini strike, the union's alternative structure and strategies could not counter the power of the state. In short, community support and a commitment to organizing the unorganized did not protect the victories won by SORWUC members at Bimini from the decisions of the

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<sup>55</sup> "SORWUC wins Bimini battle," *The Ubyyssey*, 6 January 1978.

<sup>56</sup> "SORWUC wins Bimini battle," *The Ubyyssey*, 6 January 1978.

<sup>57</sup> "SORWUC [sic] head contacting bank workers," *Kamloops Daily Standard*, 19 January 1978; "Bimini workers win contract: SORWUC victory!" *Kinesis*, January 1978.

<sup>58</sup> "SORWUC wins Bimini battle," *The Ubyyssey*, 6 January 1978.

BCLRB. Only two months into the one-year collective agreement, the workers at Bimini submitted an application for decertification to the BCLRB. Under the 1973 Labour Code of British Columbia, employees could submit an application for decertification as early as ten months after the date of certification.<sup>59</sup> Still, SORWUC officials asked the BCLRB to wait and allow the collective agreement to run its course, insisting that “the vote doesn’t reflect the workers’ feelings because ‘they haven’t had time to mend the wounds’ left by the strike.”<sup>60</sup> SORWUC members further argued that the inclusion in the collective agreement of a modified union shop meant that anti-union workers who had scabbed during the strike continued to work alongside workers who had been on strike; they claimed “this contributed to a feeling of powerlessness on the part of the women who fought and won the strike.”<sup>61</sup> A modified union shop also meant that management was able to hire more anti-union employees. Given that several pro-union employees had either quit or turned against the union, the absence of a union shop meant that by the time of the submission of the decertification application, the anti-union workers comprised more than the majority required for decertification.

Despite SORWUC’s protestations, the BCLRB scheduled a decertification vote for July, at which time Bimini workers voted 12-6 in favour of decertification. Upon receiving the results of the vote, SORWUC officials again expressed their frustration over the BCLRB’s decision to allow the vote so soon after the bitter ten-week strike and asked that the Board uphold the bargaining unit in spite of the vote. SORWUC spokesperson Ailsa Rands explained:

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<sup>59</sup> B.C. Bill 11 – Labour Code of British Columbia Act as cited in *Canadian Labour Law Reports* no. 522 (15 October 1973): 20.

<sup>60</sup> “Bimini pub workers vote to drop union,” *The Province*, 18 July 1978.

<sup>61</sup> “All the questions you’ve wanted to ask about Muckamuck,” *Kinesis*, August 1980.

It is incredible that the board would consider an application for decertification so soon after a long and bitter strike....There has been no period of peace at Bimini....The union and the union contract have never been accepted by this employer. The board's approach has encouraged the employer and anti-union employees to keep up a constant campaign against the union rather than accepting the contract as an established fact.<sup>62</sup>

Other members of the broader community echoed SORWUC members' condemnation of the BCLRB's decision to hold a decertification vote at Bimini. An article in *Kinesis*, the official newspaper of the local women's group Vancouver Status of Women, elaborated on the implications of the BCLRB decision:

This decision means there is no incentive for employers to accept union organization, to negotiate in good faith and then attempt to make a collective agreement work. On the contrary, it encourages employers to hold out through long strikes, encourage scabs and hire strikebreakers, sign a contract and then wait for decertification to make the contract null and void.<sup>63</sup>

The Vancouver & District Labour Council also condemned the BCLRB's decision to allow the decertification vote.<sup>64</sup> As a final act of protest, SORWUC members and supporters demonstrated in front of the BCLRB offices on 21 September but to no avail.<sup>65</sup> The BCLRB upheld the vote and the pub was decertified. In allowing the decertification vote so soon after the strike's conclusion, the BCLRB thereby negated the victory of SORWUC members in their struggle for not only better wages and working conditions, but also for the basic right of pub workers to unionize. One union spokesperson summed up the situation:

The union was growing at Bimini....We expected that the division among the employees could be overcome during the life of the one-year

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<sup>62</sup> "Bimini pub decertification 'outrage' to service union," *The Vancouver Sun*, 19 September 1978.

<sup>63</sup> "Decertified," *Kinesis*, October 1978.

<sup>64</sup> "Decertification of union at Bimini hit by labour body," *The Vancouver Sun*, 20 September 1978.

<sup>65</sup> "Decertified," *Kinesis*, October 1978.

agreement, and that the next test of the union's strength would come with negotiations for a second contract....The Board did not allow us that period to rebuild and recover from the strike....This decision will force unions to continue strikes until strikebreakers and scabs are fired....It makes it more difficult to organize an already difficult industry, and can only lead to longer and more bitter strikes and less stability in collective bargaining relationships.<sup>66</sup>

In short, in the face of resistance by obstinate employers, and without the security of a closed shop or labour legislation that prevented the submission of a decertification application so soon after a strike, SORWUC's commitment to organizing the unorganized would likely result in short-lived victories at best.

While the loss of the Bimini certification was a bitter blow, SORWUC members learned much from the organizing drive, the strike, and the subsequent decertification. Thus, the strike was still significant on a number of levels. Firstly, it encouraged Bimini workers to stand up for their rights and the rights of others. As SORWUC member and Bimini striker Margot Holmes explained, once the Bimini strike is over "many of us will volunteer to help SORWUC organize other pubs and restaurants. SORWUC encouraged us to take an active role in our lives, and taught us how. That made us more confident about standing up for our rights. And for other's rights."<sup>67</sup> Secondly, the strike inspired other restaurant workers to do the same. Shortly after the start of the strike, workers at another Vancouver pub located just down the road from Bimini, Jerry's Cove, joined SORWUC.<sup>68</sup> SORWUC held the certification at Jerry's Cove for several years, during which time the workers successfully negotiated multiple contracts. Finally, the strike taught union members valuable lessons about organizing in the service industry. In

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<sup>66</sup> "Bimini pub decertification 'outrage' to service union," *The Vancouver Sun*, 19 September 1978.

<sup>67</sup> "Small B.C. union is busy organizing women bank workers," *Toronto Globe & Mail*, 20 December 1977.

<sup>68</sup> "Pub workers tote placards instead of beer at Bimini," *The Vancouver Sun*, 21 October 1977.

particular, SORWUC members learned the significance of grassroots activism and community support in maintaining a strong picket line, the importance of a closed shop in securing the victories won by a successful strike, and the unbelievable power of the state in determining workers' ability to organize in unorganized industries:

We have learned important lessons from Bimini's....It is clear to us that we must not only have a union shop, but union hiring. People must be hired by the union, not management hiring someone and us forcing them to join the union....Also the Labour Relations Board must be dealt with in a much more aggressive and forceful way. Their power is tremendous! By allowing employers to stall, they ensure workers will be harassed and fired from jobs, and bargaining units lost out of fear and intimidation.<sup>69</sup>

These lessons would influence SORWUC's strategy in its future attempts to organize service workers.

SORWUC members did not have to wait long for their next battle to begin.

Indeed, at the same time that SORWUC officials were fighting the decertification vote at Bimini, union members were busy garnering support for another strike in the Vancouver service industry, this time at Muckamuck restaurant.<sup>70</sup> Opened in 1971 and named for a Chinook word meaning "to eat," Muckamuck was a First-Nations themed restaurant located at 1724 Davie Street in Vancouver's trendy West End neighbourhood.

"Patronized by well-heeled business executives and the Indian community alike," the Muckamuck was described as a restaurant where:

About 20 Indians prepare and serve such traditional Northwest Coast delicacies as seaweed, herring roe and soapberries as well as full-course seafood meals eaten from carved Haida feast bowls. Pebbles cover the

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<sup>69</sup> "All the questions you've wanted to ask about Muckamuck," *Kinesis*, August 1980.

<sup>70</sup> In this chapter, I offer a brief analysis of the Muckamuck strike in relation to SORWUC's efforts to organize unorganized workers. For a more detailed analysis of the Muckamuck strike by a former SORWUC member and that also considers the issue of race, see Janet M. Nicol, "'Unions Aren't Native': The Muckamuck Restaurant Labour Dispute, Vancouver, BC (1978-1983)," *Labour/Le Travail* 40 (Fall 1997): 235-251.

floor and Indian art hangs from the candle-lit walls. The taped music alternates between Indian chants and country and western.<sup>71</sup>

By 1978, the Muckamuck had become “known for the excellence of it’s [sic] food, service and the old fashioned Native hospitality of it’s [sic] all Indian staff.”<sup>72</sup>

Although differing in appearance and fare, Muckamuck shared many similarities with Bimini. Privately owned by Doug Christmas, Teresa Bjornson, and Jane Erickson, the restaurant employed approximately twenty full-time and part-time workers as cooks, bussers, waiters, and waitresses.<sup>73</sup> Muckamuck workers thus had many of the same grievances as Bimini workers, including low wages, harassment, no say in scheduling, short notice of scheduling changes, and lack of job security. Spokesperson for the Muckamuck workers Christina Prince explained, “It didn’t take too much to convince us we’re treated badly at work.”<sup>74</sup> Wait staff earned the provincial minimum wage of \$3.00 per hour, plus tips, with 30 per cent of their tips going to the cooks and the host; cooks

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<sup>71</sup> “Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant’s white managers,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978. The first quote comes from “Restaurant scene of unrest,” *The Indian Voice*, April 1978. As was typical at the time, many of the articles and people involved in the Muckamuck strike use the word “Indian” to describe the indigenous peoples’ of Canada. When quoting someone or something directly, I have used the terminology employed by the source; however, in my own writing, I use the words “indigenous,” “First Nations” or “Native.”

<sup>72</sup> “Restaurant scene of unrest,” *The Indian Voice*, April 1978.

<sup>73</sup> Although Muckamuck originally had three principal shareholders, a newspaper report stated that Teresa Bjornson “sold her portion of shares in the restaurant early in the strike...because she was upset by the accusations of racism.” Nicol, “Unions Aren’t Native’,” 250. While I was unable to find much information on Bjornson or Erickson, a quick internet search of Doug Christmas turned up some interesting information. A wealthy Vancouver-born art dealer now based in Los Angeles, California, Muckamuck was not the first time Christmas ran into trouble with the communities in which he does business nor would it be the last. As one reporter explains, “Going through court archives dating back only to 1976 turns up documentation for more than 55 lawsuits brought against him [Christmas]. He’s been sued by artists, dealers, collectors, private investors, service industries, landlords and former friends. He’s been sued under three different spellings of his surname and nine different business names—and this is just in L.A.” “The Ace is Wild: The Doug Christmas Story,” *LA Weekly*, 16 October 2003. See also “The Christmas connection: An artist’s impression,” *Kinesis*, August 1979. Note: Different sources use different spellings of Christmas’s surname. For consistency, I use the most common spelling: Christmas.

<sup>74</sup> “Union wasn’t spoiling for a fight,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 21 October 1978.

and bartenders earned between \$3.50 and \$4.50 per hour.<sup>75</sup> Compounding the low wages, Muckamuck management also took illegal deductions from employees' paycheques to cover the cost of uniforms, errors, and accidents—an action strictly forbidden by law.<sup>76</sup> As Muckamuck worker Ethel Gardner explained, “For the past seven years all staff members have had to pay for staff uniforms. We are told to wear dark pants and a T-shirt with Muckamuck insignia across the front. We have to pay six dollars for the shirts, the cost of which is illegally deducted from our paycheques.”<sup>77</sup> Gardner further explained how management illegally fined staff for a variety of incidents:

For example, fining the bartender \$50 for not locking a liquor cabinet or fining a salad maker for the sale cost of a pan of bannock that was allegedly ruined because she forgot to wrap it with foil for storage.

Another cook was fined the cost of about a dozen crabs because she was charged with undercooking them. At one point a notice was posted in the kitchen stating that if staff did not tie the garbage bags up they would be fined \$50.

The waiters are not exempt from the fine system as they are required to pay the cost if a customer walked out without paying for a bill. If you are caught eating during your shift you are fined or threatened with the police and arrest.<sup>78</sup>

Prior to unionizing with SORWUC, Muckamuck workers approached the Department of Labour about these illegal deductions but to no avail: “The Department of Labour would tell the employer to give the employees back their money, but there was nothing they

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<sup>75</sup> “More about the Muckamuck,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>76</sup> “Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant’s white managers,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978. Prior to the creation of the first comprehensive Employment Standards Act in 1980, a variety of legislative acts administered by three different boards governed labour relations in British Columbia. Administered by the Board of Industrial Relations, the *General Minimum Wage Order* covered issues pertaining to wages. Section 10 of the Order stated, “No charge or deduction from wages of any employee shall be made by the employer for accidental damage to or breakage of any article belonging to or in the custody of the employer, or as a penalty for unsatisfactory work.” James E. Dorsey, *Employee/Employer Rights in British Columbia* (Vancouver: International Self-Counsel Press Ltd., 1979), 30.

<sup>77</sup> “More about the Muckamuck,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>78</sup> “More about the Muckamuck,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

could do to prevent any of the illegal acts from happening again, unless we had a union contract.”<sup>79</sup>

Along with low wages and illegal deductions, there were also disputes around harassment and scheduling. As at Bimini, workers at Muckamuck complained of “constant criticism and belittlement from management.”<sup>80</sup> In addition, Muckamuck management would often cancel shifts at the last minute or call employees up on their days off demanding they come in to work. One Muckamuck worker explained:

Scheduling is not done in a routine manner...and in fact is so bad that employees are told they must have phones or they can't continue to work at Muckamuck. The reason for this rule is so that management can reach you to say: “you're not on tonight” or “there was a sudden shift change, can you come in as soon as possible.” If you say no then you are pressured by the response – “Oh, but you're our last hope you just have to help out.” The implied threat is that staff not complying with these requests can go elsewhere for a job.<sup>81</sup>

Another employee echoed these sentiments: “One of the biggest problems is scheduling. The way it is now, some of us don't know from one day to the next what our hours will be.”<sup>82</sup> In addition to changes in scheduling, management would also change employees' duties for short periods of time without prior notice.<sup>83</sup>

Wanting to change their working conditions, several Muckamuck workers contacted SORWUC about unionizing the restaurant. As with the Bimini workers, Muckamuck employees chose SORWUC for its unique structure and approach to unionization. The workers explained, “We chose to join SORWUC because it is an independent union located in Canada and its constitution guarantees us control over our

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<sup>79</sup> “The other side of the fence,” *The Indian Voice*, November 1978.

<sup>80</sup> “Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant's white managers,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978.

<sup>81</sup> “More about the Muckamuck,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>82</sup> “Restaurant scene of unrest,” *The Indian Voice*, April 1978.

<sup>83</sup> “Restaurant scene of unrest,” *Indian Voice*, April 1978.

own contract demands and our own bargaining unit.”<sup>84</sup> Another employee added, “We joined SORWUC because it is a union that lets us draw up our own contract to reflect our own situation.”<sup>85</sup> On 23 February 1978, SORWUC submitted an application for certification at Muckamuck to the BCLRB with 18 out of a possible 21 employee signatures. The union received certification on 21 March and shortly thereafter began negotiating with management.<sup>86</sup>

Relations between SORWUC and Muckamuck management were tense from the start. In the three months between certification and the onset of the strike, management fired several employees and allegedly harassed several others.<sup>87</sup> Fired Muckamuck employee Rey George explained, “The primary union organizer was fired the day that management was notified of the application for certification. Since then, six more of us have been fired or intimidated into quitting. All seven are union members, most quite active.”<sup>88</sup> Workers also accused management of attempting to bribe employees by offering them pay raises and management positions if they promised to disassociate themselves from the union and its activities.<sup>89</sup> Believing management’s behaviour to be a direct result of the employees’ union activity, SORWUC filed five charges of unfair labour practice with the BCLRB.<sup>90</sup>

While awaiting the BCLRB decisions, Muckamuck workers continued to press management to negotiate. Shortly after receiving certification, the Muckamuck workers

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<sup>84</sup> “More about the Muckamuck,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>85</sup> “Muckamuck certified,” *Kinesis*, April 1978.

<sup>86</sup> “Muckamuck: What is happening now?” *Kinesis*, May 1979.

<sup>87</sup> “Unrest at native restaurant continues,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1978; “More about the Muckamuck,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>88</sup> “Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant’s white managers,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978.

<sup>89</sup> “Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant’s white managers,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978; “More about the Muckamuck,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>90</sup> “Muckamuck certified,” *Kinesis*, April 1978.

elected a negotiating committee to meet with management; the committee consisted of several staff members and one SORWUC representative.<sup>91</sup> The employees' demands included:

All people fired or forced to quit since the Union started to be rehired; wage increases for all staff; a fair discipline procedure and job security; a say in scheduling and no short notice of changes in hours; no deductions for uniforms; and a Union Shop (all staff to be union members so management can't try and divide us).<sup>92</sup>

Unfortunately, management opposed most of the workers' demands. For example, when the union requested a guaranteed base wage of \$5.00 per hour, management refused, saying that they could not possibly afford to pay such wages because the restaurant already had "one of the highest food costs to the restaurant per serving of any restaurant in Canada."<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the union was adamant that management rehire all fired workers on "non-negotiable terms;" however, this was one of the first proposals rejected by management.<sup>94</sup>

Management's unwillingness to negotiate was further evidenced by their refusal to meet and late arrival and early departure from the few meetings that were held.<sup>95</sup> For example, on 17 April, the Muckamuck workers' negotiating committee met with management's lawyer, William E. McDonald, who informed them that he "wished to review their [the employees'] proposed contract before setting up a definite schedule for meetings in the future' and it would be 'impossible' to proceed until that time."<sup>96</sup> From

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<sup>91</sup> "More about the Muckamuck," *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>92</sup> "Unrest at native restaurant continues," *The Indian Voice*, June 1978. Original parentheses.

<sup>93</sup> "More about the Muckamuck," *The Indian Voice*, June 1978; "Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant's white managers," *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978.

<sup>94</sup> "Restaurant scene of unrest," *The Indian Voice*, April 1978.

<sup>95</sup> "More about the Muckamuck," *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>96</sup> "Restaurant scene of unrest," *The Indian Voice*, April 1978.

that point, there were few meetings to negotiate; in total, management and the workers' negotiating committee met four times between 17 April and 31 May.<sup>97</sup> Throughout negotiations, both sides consistently accused one another of refusing to bargain in good faith.<sup>98</sup>

Frustrated by the slow response of the BCLRB and management's unwillingness to meet, at the end of May, the union decided to set up an information picket outside the restaurant. Hoping to pressure management to bargain in good faith, union members distributed leaflets to customers and passers-by that explained some of the workers' grievances and outlined the situation to date.<sup>99</sup> One section of the leaflet read, "We want to have decent working conditions and to be treated with respect. Some of our grievances are: poor pay, no job security, no say in scheduling, short notice of changes in scheduled hours, illegal deductions for uniforms (T-shirts) and constant criticism and belittlement from management."<sup>100</sup> Management responded by asking the BCLRB "for an order prohibiting union supporters from handing out leaflets to restaurant patrons" and by distributing its own leaflet. In response, SORWUC quickly filed three more complaints of unfair labour practice and refusal to bargain in good faith with the Board.<sup>101</sup> Although SORWUC had waited two months to have their original charges of unfair labour practice heard by the BCLRB, within a week and a half of management filing the complaint over the information picket, the Board called an "informal" hearing to address the matter. On 29 May, the BCLRB decided that the information picket was an illegal picket and

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<sup>97</sup> "More about the Muckamuck" *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>98</sup> "Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant's white managers," *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978.

<sup>99</sup> "Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant's white managers," *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978.

<sup>100</sup> "Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant's white managers," *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978.

<sup>101</sup> "Indian cooks, waiters battle restaurant's white managers," *The Vancouver Sun*, 24 May 1978.

ordered the union to cease and desist.<sup>102</sup> With negotiations at a standstill and the list of complaints to the BCLRB piling up on both sides, union members decided that the best way to deal with their grievances was to force management back to the bargaining table.<sup>103</sup> Given management's refusal to bargain to date, a strike seemed the only logical solution. On Sunday, 28 May, a majority of the workers voted to strike and on 1 June, the Muckamuck strike officially began.

The Muckamuck strike continued for over two years. Throughout the strike, SORWUC maintained an active picket line. As with the Bimini strike, given the small size of the bargaining unit—21 people—the maintenance of a strong picket line for over two years is impressive and was largely dependent on support from other SORWUC members and a variety of labour and community groups. Many groups pledged their support early in the strike; one spokesperson noted, “The Vancouver Indian Centre, the Native Voice, the United Native Nations, the Native Courtworkers, the Native Brotherhood and Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs have all assured us of their support. The trade union movement and women's groups have also assured us of their support.”<sup>104</sup> In addition to offering verbal and moral support, many of these groups also joined SORWUC members on the picket line. On the first day of the strike, “the pickets attracted the support of several native Indian groups. Five drummers from the Indian Centre Society used a large drum to pound out a beat ‘representing the heartbeat of the people’ and the pickets, some dressed in native costume, shuffled in step around them, carrying picket signs demanding talks.”<sup>105</sup> A striking Muckamuck worker summed up

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<sup>102</sup> “Unrest at native restaurant continues,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1978.

<sup>103</sup> “Muckamuck workers serve strike notice against owners,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 29 May 1978.

<sup>104</sup> “Muckamuck workers on strike,” *Kinesis*, June 1978.

<sup>105</sup> “Drum sounds on warpath picket,” *The Province*, 2 June 1978.

the degree of support at the end of the strike's first week: "We've already gotten lots of support from other Native groups, from SORWUC, and the BC Federation of Labour."<sup>106</sup>

Support from SORWUC members and community groups continued throughout the strike. On 12 August, two and a half months into the strike, more than 150 people staged a protest march to support the striking Muckamuck workers.<sup>107</sup> The participants marched from the restaurant to co-owner Doug Christmas's nearby art gallery, "distributing leaflets to passers-by, other restaurant employees, and singing union songs and chanting: 'What do we want? – A contract! When do we want it? – Now!'"<sup>108</sup> At the gallery, people rallied in support of the striking Muckamuck workers; then president of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs George Manuel spoke to the crowd while SORWUC members sold raffle tickets to raise money for the strike fund.

In addition to support on the picket line and at the march, striking Muckamuck workers also received a great deal of financial support from several sources, some far from the traditional labour movement. Muckamuck employees raised almost \$400 at a United Native Nations Convention and organized a benefit at a local hall.<sup>109</sup> Striking Muckamuck employees also benefited from the generous financial donations of other SORWUC members, various community and labour groups, and the public:

Donations from the trade union movement in B.C. continue to be good. About \$3,000 has been contributed by the following unions: AUCE, Locals 1, 2 & 4; United Fisherman & Allied Workers Union; Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC); Canadian Brotherhood of Railway

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<sup>106</sup> "BC Indian workers fighting for unionization," *The Forge*, 9 June 1978. Native groups that supported the Muckamuck workers included the United Native Nations, the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, and the Vancouver Indian Centre. "Native workers strike Muckamuck restaurant," *Pacific Tribune*, 9 June 1978.

<sup>107</sup> "Strikers stage march," *The Vancouver Sun*, 15 August 1978; "The Muckamuck walk," *Kinesis*, September 1978.

<sup>108</sup> "S.O.R.W.U.C. News (Summer 1978);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 9, Folder 9-1.

<sup>109</sup> "S.O.R.W.U.C. News (Summer 1978);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 9, Folder 9-1.

and Transport Workers, Local 400; Int'l Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 213; I.W.A. [International Woodworkers of America]; Canadian Paperworkers Union, Port Alberni Local; Hospital Employees Union; B.C. Projectionists Union; Local 348; CAIMAW; CUPE [Canadian Union of Public Employees]; Journeymen & Apprentices Local of the Plumbers Union; Canadian Union of Postal Workers, Vancouver and Victoria Locals; Letter Carriers Union of Canada, Vancouver Local; Vancouver & District Labour Council; and the United Bank workers – both B.C. and Saskatchewan Sections of SORWUC.

The Vancouver Status of Women and several individuals have also contributed to the strike fund.<sup>110</sup>

By July 1980, as the Muckamuck strike passed the two-year mark, the union had raised \$36,000 for strike pay. This money was vital to replenishing a strike fund depleted by the Bimini strike. With it, SORWUC was able to pay strike pay for the entire strike.<sup>111</sup>

The outpouring of support from the community and other SORWUC members also helped to maintain morale and offset management's sustained efforts to break the strike and convince workers to get rid of the union. One of the most notable incidents occurred in the initial days of the strike, when Muckamuck co-owner Doug Christmas brought controversial American Indian Movement (AIM) leader Russell Means to

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<sup>110</sup> "S.O.R.W.U.C. News (Summer 1978);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 9, Folder 9-1. Support for the striking Muckamuck workers continued throughout the strike. Indeed, two years into the strike, *Kinesis* reported, "Native groups, including the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, United Native Nations, and the Vancouver Indian Centre have given us their continued support over the past two years. Members of the West Coast AIM [American Indian Movement] have picketed with us and continue to support us. SORWUC has received financial support and constant encouragement from other unions. Members from other unions walk the picket line with us. Teamsters refuse to pick up Muckamuck garbage. Passersby often give us words of encouragement and donations to our strike fund." "Muckamuck: A strike for Indian self-determination," *Kinesis*, July 1980.

<sup>111</sup> In the initial months of the strike, all striking Muckamuck employees who picketed received \$50 per week and those with children received \$75 per week. "More about the Muckamuck," *The Indian Voice*, June 1978. In December 1978, the union increased the amount of strike pay due to the length of the strike; however, I was unable to determine the amount to which it was increased. "Muckamuck: What is happening now?" *Kinesis*, May 1979.

Vancouver to persuade the workers to end the strike and quit the union.<sup>112</sup> On 2 June, Means met with the workers and, rather than address the labour dispute directly, encouraged the workers to form a co-operative and run the restaurant themselves. According to striking Muckamuck workers, Means's discussion of the dispute was limited to warning management to "treat these people [Muckamuck employees] properly."<sup>113</sup> Although Means did not take sides originally, he later sided with scabbing Muckamuck workers in their attempts to apply for decertification. A telegram from Means displayed in the window of the restaurant read in part:

To the Indian Brothers and Sisters on the staff greetings of solidarity. The Dakota American Indian Movement, AIM and the International Treaty Council are proud and honoured to join you in your struggle to determine your own destiny against the forces who attempt to manipulate and exploitate [*sic*] Indian peoples lives. Your fight against unionization is a beacon of inspiration for the Indian peoples struggle for liberation against all outside forces.<sup>114</sup>

SORWUC members criticized Means for not researching both sides of the dispute before sending the telegram; Means did not contact the striking workers or the union nor did he consult with the local AIM chapters, a contravention of AIM policies. Indeed, had he done so, he would have learned that members of the West Coast AIM supported the striking Muckamuck employees, having walked the picket line and donated prizes to the strike fund raffles.<sup>115</sup>

In addition to attempting to take advantage of striking workers' cultural and political allegiances, management also harassed strikers. Fired Muckamuck employee

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<sup>112</sup> "Native workers strike Muckamuck restaurant," *Pacific Tribune*, 9 June 1978. Another article stated that the owners actually paid Means's expenses to come to Vancouver "to have his portrait painted." "Rebuttal to 'Muckamuck story update'," *The Indian Voice*, June 1980.

<sup>113</sup> "All the questions you've wanted to ask about Muckamuck," *Kinesis*, August 1980.

<sup>114</sup> "Russell Means supports Muckamuck staff in dispute," *The Indian Voice*, May 1980.

<sup>115</sup> "Rebuttal to 'Muckamuck story update'," *The Indian Voice*, June 1980; "All the questions you've wanted to ask about Muckamuck," *Kinesis*, August 1980.

Sam Bob accused Muckamuck manager Carol Nowoselsky of getting him fired from his new job at the nearby Kontiki restaurant by telling his new employer about his involvement in SORWUC: “He [Bob’s new boss] said I was a good worker and would have worked out fine but because of the union bit I was fired.”<sup>116</sup> In response, SORWUC members set up a picket outside the Kontiki to protest Bob’s firing.<sup>117</sup>

While SORWUC’s differences from much of the Canadian labour movement helped the union to organize the Muckamuck workers and maintain a solid picket line, as in the Bimini strike, it hindered the union in other ways. In addition, having learned valuable lessons at Bimini about securing the victories won by a strike—in particular, the importance of a closed shop and the power of labour legislation and labour relations boards—SORWUC’s commitment to ensuring the same fate did not befall the Muckamuck workers shaped the union’s strategy and tactics. First, having lost the certification at Bimini due to the inclusion of a modified union shop in the collective agreement, SORWUC members were adamant that a closed shop be included in the Muckamuck contract. As one union member wrote in a 1979 SORWUC newsletter, “In the restaurant industry, the Closed Shop is the only alternative if we want to hold on to our rights and benefits that we win through negotiations and/or strike action.”<sup>118</sup> Given management’s firm opposition to this clause, one wonders whether the strike would have continued as long as it did had SORWUC not been so set on winning a closed shop. Indeed, a closed shop and the rehiring of all fired employees were the union’s only two non-negotiable demands.<sup>119</sup> Unfortunately, when management and striking employees

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<sup>116</sup> “Picket up to stay,” *The Province*, 13 July 1978.

<sup>117</sup> “Picket up to stay,” *The Province*, 13 July 1978.

<sup>118</sup> “S.O.R.W.U.C. News (September 1979);” UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 9, Folder 9-1.

<sup>119</sup> “S.O.R.W.U.C. News (Summer 1978);” UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 9, Folder 9-1.

met with a private mediator on 26 July—the first meeting between the two groups since the start of the strike in June—management announced that they would not compromise on these two issues.<sup>120</sup> Still, SORWUC members believed that a strong picket line would eventually force management to concede.

Although being an independent union helped SORWUC in many ways, the lack of a substantial treasury certainly hindered the union. Specifically, limited funds meant that the union could not pay striking Muckamuck workers much strike pay. Although the union did manage to pay strike pay for the entire strike, the amount paid—between \$50 and \$100 a week—was not enough to make ends meet, and so financial need forced many striking Muckamuck employees to seek temporary employment elsewhere. As the strike wore on, the number of Muckamuck workers actively walking the picket line decreased. In October 1978, as the strike passed the four-month mark, only eight of the original twenty striking employees were still picketing regularly.<sup>121</sup> By July 1980, there were four striking employees picketing regularly.<sup>122</sup> Still, union members pointed out that the “strike has gone on for over two years, picketing seven days a week (that’s 35 hours/week to cover). It is unrealistic to expect to see a striker on each shift.”<sup>123</sup> Further, SORWUC spokesperson Jean Rands maintained that despite their absence from the picket line, those Muckamuck employees who had found temporary work were “anxious to get back to the Muckamuck when a contract is signed.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> “S.O.R.W.U.C. News (Summer 1978);” UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 9, Folder 9-1.

<sup>121</sup> “Cowboys lasso Muckamuck,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 11 October 1978.

<sup>122</sup> “S.O.R.W.U.C. News (July 1980);” UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-3.

<sup>123</sup> “S.O.R.W.U.C. News (July 1980);” UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-3. Original parentheses.

<sup>124</sup> “Cowboys lasso Muckamuck,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 11 October 1978.

While the limited number of striking Muckamuck employees on the picket line did not detract from the strength of the line itself, it left the union open to charges that the union no longer represented the majority of Muckamuck employees and, ultimately, set the stage for several applications for decertification by scabbing employees. The Muckamuck picket line successfully disrupted business operations to the point where the owners of Muckamuck decided to close the restaurant during the initial months of the strike; however, four and a half months into the strike, the owners reopened the upper portion of the restaurant as a lounge—the Chilcotin Bar 7. Operating under a new name and a new “cowboy” theme, the owners staffed the lounge with scab labour and several former employees who had decided to cross the picket line.<sup>125</sup> In response, SORWUC members vowed to picket around the clock to keep out customers and stop deliveries.<sup>126</sup> When customers failed to take to the new lounge, management eventually reopened the lower portion of the restaurant as Muckamuck later that fall.

During this time, management and strikebreaking employees used the shortage of original Muckamuck workers on the picket line to their advantage in their attempts to win public support and break the union. In January 1979, strikebreaking employees submitted an application for decertification to the BCLRB, claiming that the union no longer represented a majority of the original employees.<sup>127</sup> In June, the Board rejected the application, with BCLRB vice-chairman Ron Bone stating that “the board’s investigations did not show that the majority of the original bargaining unit no longer

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<sup>125</sup> Of the original 18 Muckamuck employees who joined SORWUC, six eventually quit the union and crossed the picket line to work. “A new twist for Muckamuck,” *The West Ender*, 25 October 1979; “Rebuttal to ‘Muckamuck story update’,” *The Indian Voice*, June 1980.

<sup>126</sup> “Cowboys lasso Muckamuck,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 11 October 1978.

<sup>127</sup> “Decertification sought,” *The Vancouver Express*, 2 February 1979.

supported the strike.”<sup>128</sup> The strikebreakers appealed, but a second BCLRB panel upheld the decision two months later.<sup>129</sup> In total, strike-breaking employees at the Muckamuck submitted three applications for decertification during the strike. They submitted the final application in December 1979 and then asked for an adjournment before withdrawing the application in May 1980. In August 1980, SORWUC members reported that the BCLRB “has spent 14 of the 26 months considering scab applications for decertification.”<sup>130</sup>

In addition to submitting applications for decertification, strikebreaking employees also “issued press statements, appeared on television, and even set-up a counter picket-line for a week-end.”<sup>131</sup> At the same time that strikebreaking employees were appealing the original BCLRB decision, management also submitted a complaint to the Board, arguing that “the [certification] issue should be determined by the continuing participation in the strike by the original workers.”<sup>132</sup> The Board rejected management’s submission, stating that “in every lengthy strike there will be employees who do not picket but remain interested and intend to return to their jobs when the dispute is settled.”<sup>133</sup>

In rejecting the submissions of management and the strikebreakers, the BCLRB assisted SORWUC’s efforts to organize restaurant workers. Yet while the BCLRB upheld SORWUC’s certification at Muckamuck in light of management and strikebreaking employees’ sustained efforts to attain decertification, it significantly

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<sup>128</sup> “A new twist for Muckamuck,” *The West Ender*, 25 October 1979.

<sup>129</sup> “A new twist for Muckamuck,” *The West Ender*, 25 October 1979.

<sup>130</sup> “SORWUC: All the questions you’ve wanted to ask about Muckamuck,” *Kinesis*, August 1980.

<sup>131</sup> “It’s cowboys vs. Indians at Muckamuck strike,” *The Georgia Straight*, 8 December 1978.

<sup>132</sup> “A new twist for Muckamuck,” *The West Ender*, 25 October 1979.

<sup>133</sup> “A new twist for Muckamuck,” *The West Ender*, 25 October 1979.

hindered the union in other ways. Indeed, along with the police and the provincial courts, the BCLRB played a key role in determining the efficacy of the Muckamuck strike, especially as tensions on the picket line started to rise.

With the restaurant reopened, the opportunity for clashes between management, scabs, customers, and strikers increased, and incidents of conflict and violence on the picket line became commonplace. In December, as the strike reached the six-month mark, local newspaper *The Georgia Straight* reported on the increasing number of conflicts occurring on the Muckamuck picket line:

The strikers, members of the Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), Local 1, have reported a number of petty and major incidents on the line. They include threats from a drunken crow-bar waving customer, a bucket of hot water being thrown at a striking waitress, and most recently, a picketer allegedly being thrown to the ground and nearly strangled by a strike-breaking employee. In this last incident, the union member, Margaret Siggurdsen, is being charged with assault for allegedly throwing a cup of cocoa at Louis McCook, a newly-hired restaurant employee who had taken a pair of gloves belonging to a picketer. Police claim they are keeping a constant eye on the restaurant as a result of frequent complaints from both sides.<sup>134</sup>

The courts and the police used such incidents to hinder the effectiveness of the picket line. Given that the purpose of a picket line is to stop production to put economic pressure on management to negotiate a collective agreement, the ability of a union to maintain a strong line is crucial. Although the Muckamuck strike was a legal strike, on 1 June 1979—the one-year anniversary of the start of the strike—at management's request, Justice Patricia Proudfoot granted an injunction temporarily banning all picketing at the Muckamuck, citing violence on the picket line.<sup>135</sup> To mark the strike's one-year anniversary, SORWUC members had planned to hold a celebration outside the restaurant:

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<sup>134</sup> "It's cowboys vs. Indians at Muckamuck strike," *The Georgia Straight*, 8 December 1978.

<sup>135</sup> "Wading through the Muckamuck strike," *Kinesis*, July 1979.

“60 people were expected to rally at the restaurant, to sing and eat a huge chocolate cake baked for the occasion. The celebration moved to a nearby beach where the shocked union members tried to recall the last time such an injunction had been granted in B.C.”<sup>136</sup> SORWUC members quickly filed an appeal and on 6 June, the British Columbia Court of Appeals overturned the ban on picketing but limited the number of pickets to six. Unsatisfied with the imposed limit on the number of pickets, on 18 June, SORWUC filed another appeal, but Justice Proudfoot upheld the limit of six pickets, “saying that unlimited pickets would damage tourist season business.”<sup>137</sup>

In addition to the courts, the police also interfered with SORWUC’s efforts to maintain a strong picket line. As violence on the picket line became common, the police arrested and charged individuals from both sides on several different occasions; however, SORWUC members argued that the police and the courts treated union members and supporters differently:

In spite of a number of assault charges against scabs, only one was ever heard in court. There have been assault charges against four picketers; two more were found guilty and they were given no sentence.

The police are either unresponsive to picketers’ complaints, or downright abusive. This leads to a bizarre situation where there is no police protection for assaults against picketers, while if the picketer ever accidentally brushes against a scab, we are charged with assault.<sup>138</sup>

For example, on 2 November 1979, Judge Gordon Johnson found strikebreaker Peter Ronny Martin not guilty of assaulting an elderly strike supporter. Judge Johnson “ruled that Peter Ronny Martin, 23, took reasonable action when Aaron Schneider deliberately

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<sup>136</sup> “Wading through the Muckamuck strike,” *Kinesis*, July 1979.

<sup>137</sup> “Wading through the Muckamuck strike,” *Kinesis*, July 1979.

<sup>138</sup> “SORWUC: All the questions you’ve wanted to ask about Muckamuck,” *Kinesis*, August 1980.

blocked his entry to the coastal Indian restaurant at 1724 Davie.”<sup>139</sup> In contrast, when two SORWUC members attempted to lay assault charges against Muckamuck manager Sussy Selbst in February 1980, the Justice of the Peace told them “to return the following day. He said he didn’t have the police reports yet.”<sup>140</sup> When the picketers returned the next day, they were charged with assault and placed under arrest; they were released later that day on the condition that they not return to the picket line. Despite the protestations of their lawyer—“that this was an unreasonable decision and that the accused had had no opportunity for a hearing”—the judge upheld the picketing ban on the two members.<sup>141</sup> The blatant difference in the courts’ treatment of management and their supporters versus that of union members and supporters frustrated SORWUC members:

The courts have consistently colluded with management in this strike. This is a legal strike, yet they have taken away two people’s right to picket. The courts and the police have never been interested in protecting picketers from assault and harassment; they have however, responded very quickly when there are any charges, no matter how petty and contrived, against union members.<sup>142</sup>

With management unwilling to return to the bargaining table and the number of pickets limited, thereby depriving SORWUC of its best weapon—community support—in the fall of 1979, SORWUC reluctantly turned to the BCLRB for assistance. After SORWUC’s frustrating experience with the BCLRB prior to the onset of the Muckamuck strike, SORWUC members were hesitant to file another complaint with the Board:

This [filing the complaint with the BCLRB] was done after much internal discussion in the Union. People who have experienced the Labour Relations Board are aware that like any other government bureaucracy, the Labour Relations Board has a dual view of the laws it is supposed to

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<sup>139</sup> “Muckamuck worker not guilty,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 3 November 1979.

<sup>140</sup> “Violence on the Muckamuck line, picketers arrested,” *Kinesis*, March 1980.

<sup>141</sup> “Violence on the Muckamuck line, picketers arrested,” *Kinesis*, March 1980.

<sup>142</sup> “Violence on the Muckamuck line, picketers arrested,” *Kinesis*, March 1980.

enforce—what is all right for management is not all right for workers. We ultimately decided to lay the complaint anyway.<sup>143</sup>

In October, the union asked the Board to force management to return to the bargaining table, to stop strikebreaking staff from harassing picketers, and to cease their slander of the union. By January of the following year, the BCLRB had done nothing in regards to SORWUC's submission, as strikebreaking employees had submitted a third application for decertification the previous month and the Board said that "that took precedence over any complaint."<sup>144</sup> The Board investigated the decertification application and set a hearing date for March, at which time the strikebreakers asked for and received an adjournment to May. In May, they withdrew their complaint.<sup>145</sup>

SORWUC members never did successfully negotiate a contract at the Muckamuck. Instead, the union actively picketed the Muckamuck until the restaurant closed in November 1980. The Board did not make a decision in regards to SORWUC's October 1979 submission until April 1981—seventeen months after the original date of submission. At that time, the Board ruled that Muckamuck management "violated the B.C. Labor Code by failing to negotiate in good faith with SORWUC for a first contract."<sup>146</sup> However, the Board delayed ruling on compensation until after it could hear an application for certification of the Muckamuck employees by the Northwestern Hospitality Employees Association. Three and a half years after the original submission, in February 1983, the BCLRB issued its final ruling on the Muckamuck case and ordered Muckamuck owners Doug Christmas and Jane Erickson to pay the union \$10,000.

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<sup>143</sup> "SORWUC: All the questions you've wanted to ask about Muckamuck," *Kinesis*, August 1980.

<sup>144</sup> "SORWUC: All the questions you've wanted to ask about Muckamuck," *Kinesis*, August 1980.

<sup>145</sup> "SORWUC: All the questions you've wanted to ask about Muckamuck," *Kinesis*, August 1980.

<sup>146</sup> "Muckamuck 'failed to bargain in good faith'," *The Vancouver Sun*, 25 April 1981.

Unfortunately, the 1983 decision was too little too late, as Christmas and Erickson had already closed the restaurant and left the country.<sup>147</sup>

This chapter has shown how SORWUC's differences from much of the Canadian labour movement both helped and hindered the union's experiences organizing unorganized workers in the service industry. It has also demonstrated that the union's radical approach to unionization made little difference in the union's dealings with the labour boards and the courts. In short, commitment and community support were not enough to organize the unorganized; as with other labour disputes, the power of the state ultimately determined the outcome of the situations at Bimini and Muckamuck.

Yet, while the battles at Bimini and Muckamuck ultimately ended in defeat, both strikes are significant to the history of class and labour organizing in British Columbia. First, the strikes themselves are important historical events: the Bimini strike marked the first time workers struck a neighbourhood pub in British Columbia while the Muckamuck strike remains one of the longest strikes in British Columbia labour history. Second, the strikes are significant to the history of organizing unorganized workers. Specifically, the strikes illustrate the issues faced by workers trying to organize in unorganized industries and speak to what it will take to accomplish this task. Since SORWUC's efforts in the 1970s and 1980s, no union has fared much better. SORWUC's experiences thus hold some important lessons for the contemporary labour movement. On the one hand, the

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<sup>147</sup> In the years immediately after Muckamuck closed, the property changed hands several times: first in 1984, when it became a small family-run grocery store, and again in 1985, when several indigenous people, including some former Muckamuck strikers, opened a new restaurant, The Quillicum. I was unable to find any additional information on The Quillicum, other than a brief mention in the May 1985 Local 1 newsletter that SORWUC members were "in touch with the [former Muckamuck] strikers." In 1998, The Quillicum became Liliget Feast House & Catering, an indigenous owned and operated restaurant and catering company that remained open until 2007. I was unable to determine whether this last change in name accompanied a change in ownership. "SORWUC Local 1 Newsletter (February 1984)," UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-5. "SORWUC Local 1 Newsletter (May 1985)," UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-2.

strikes at Bimini and Muckamuck show the importance of alternative union structures and strategies, as well as community support, in winning members and maintaining strong picket lines. On the other hand, the strikes illustrate the limits of alternative strategies in winning long-term improvements for workers if the courts and labour relations boards refuse to enforce labour legislation or protect the right of workers to strike. As SORWUC members explained:

The stated purpose of the labour laws is to enable workers to organize but the fact is that the labour laws are set up to benefit only the employers. They are set up so that without the employer's agreement, there can be no union. We are told that unions create an adversary situation but there is no adversary; the labour laws prevent unions from taking effective action.<sup>148</sup>

In short, legislative constraints played a key role in countering the efficacy of SORWUC's strikes at Bimini and Muckamuck, and therefore hindered SORWUC's efforts to organize unorganized workers. Thus, this chapter has shown that while alternative union strategies are a crucial part of organizing the unorganized, they are only part of the solution. Organizing the unorganized will also require legislative changes that address the specific needs of workers employed in the service industry, an industry characterized by small bargaining units, high employee turnover, and hostile anti-union employers.

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<sup>148</sup> "SORWUC Local 1 Newsletter ([Month unknown] 1981);" UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-2.

## CONCLUSION

By the mid-1980s, the Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC) had become a shadow of its former self. Worn out by the lengthy strike at Muckamuck and lacking funds and volunteers, in January 1986, union members questioned the future direction of the union:

Given that we are no longer doing effective political action, it must be asked if SORWUC can survive and [if] SORWUC [is] even necessary. Other unions are presently being more successful at organizing the unorganized. If SORWUC represents only the bargaining units in it and does not speak to or for the masses of unorganized working women, then that could be done by other union[s] who can afford paid workers.<sup>1</sup>

No longer able to work towards the union's original goal of organizing the unorganized, SORWUC disbanded later that year.

Although SORWUC no longer exists, this thesis has argued that the union remains an important part of Canadian labour history—a significant example of a radical approach to unionization. First, in examining SORWUC as a case study of a union dedicated to organizing unorganized workers, this thesis has shown how and why SORWUC differed from much of the 1970s Canadian labour movement. Recognizing the need for working-class solidarity but critical of the gendered structure and practices of the existing labour movement and its failure to organize unorganized workers, SORWUC's founding members sought to solve this problem through the development of an independent, grassroots, socialist feminist labour union that reflected and addressed

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<sup>1</sup> "SORWUC Local 1 Newsletter (January 1986)," UBCL-RBSC, SORWUC fonds; Box 6, Folder 6-2.

the specific needs of women workers while working to organize all unorganized workers. Thus, SORWUC is an important historical example of the ways in which class and gender intertwine, not in theory but in the real world.

Second, this thesis has argued that SORWUC's differences both helped and hindered its efforts to organize unorganized workers. In particular, it examined SORWUC's experiences organizing a pub and a restaurant to demonstrate how the union's differences from much of the Canadian labour movement played out on the ground. On the one hand, SORWUC's grassroots unionism and community ties won it members and allowed it to maintain strong picket lines at Bimini and Muckamuck. On the other hand, the union's independence allowed it to be raided by a rival union and meant it struggled to pay legal bills and strike pay. That SORWUC achieved even limited success organizing in the service industry, an industry the Canadian labour movement continues to struggle to organize, indicates that the history of SORWUC holds important lessons about the type of organizing required in the service industry.

Finally, this thesis has argued that although SORWUC's radical approach to unionization was a crucial factor in its ability to organize unorganized workers, it was not enough to counter the powerful role of the state in labour relations. Specifically, while SORWUC was able to maintain strong picket lines at Bimini and Muckamuck, in both instances, labour relations boards and the courts ultimately determined the outcome. At Bimini, the BCLRB's controversial decision to allow a decertification vote only two months after the conclusion of a bitter ten-week strike cancelled SORWUC's certification and with it, the collective agreement for which the union had fought so hard. At Muckamuck, the BCLRB's repeated failure to deal with SORWUC's numerous charges

of unfair labour practice in a timely manner, combined with the court's decision to restrict the number of pickets, limited the effectiveness of SORWUC's strike. In both cases, the action or inaction of the state was crucial in countering the efficacy of SORWUC's radical approach to unionization and obstructing its efforts to organize unorganized workers.

What are the implications and the larger significance of the history of SORWUC? First, SORWUC's efforts to develop an alternative form of unionization are but one example of class-based social justice movements of the 1970s and 1980s, part of a broader trend of labour activism that arose in response to the situation facing Canadian workers at the time. Second, while this thesis has examined the structure and activities of SORWUC as an alternative union dedicated to organizing the unorganized, more work is needed that looks at the powerful role of labour legislation, labour relations boards, and the courts in shaping the ability of unorganized workers to organize. For, as Karl Marx once wrote, people "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past."<sup>2</sup> SORWUC's struggles with the courts and the federal and provincial labour relations boards reflect the fact that any union hoping to organize in unorganized industries must contend with the frustrating system of labour relations constructed in the immediate postwar period and that continues to shape labour relations today.

Finally, SORWUC's experiences organizing unorganized workers also hold important lessons for the contemporary labour movement. With a labour force

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 329-356.

increasingly comprised of workers from different racial and gender groupings and employed in industries that remain, for the most part, unorganized, the need for unions to organize in these industries and around these potential divisions remains vitally important. As sociologist Gillian Creese writes in her study of race, class, and gender in another British Columbia labour union, “The development of alternative union strategies can be enhanced by considering how other union activists have begun to reconsider definitions of equality, solidarity, and union democracy in more inclusive ways.”<sup>3</sup> In examining the structure and strategies of an alternative union, this thesis contributes to the process of historical reconsideration suggested by Creese. This is not to say that historical examples of alternative unions like SORWUC provide a perfect prescription for successful union organization today. Rather, SORWUC’s desire and ability to do things differently serve as an important reminder that there is always another way of thinking about the world and acting within it, even when we are repeatedly told, and have come to believe, that there is not.

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<sup>3</sup> Gillian Creese, *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class, and Race in a White-Collar Union, 1944-1994* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1999), 209.

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