

AUCE & TSSU

Memoirs of a Feminist Union

1972 - 1993

by

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AUCE & TSSU: Memoirs of a Feminist Union,
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Introduction

This history of the Teaching Support Staff Union is timely, as TSSU's parent, the Association of University and College Employees, has now existed for twenty years. TSSU is the last remaining independent local of AUCE, though several other locals have joined mainstream unions.

The three essays included here describe three different eras in the history of AUCE and TSSU, but some of the tensions found in the organization have remained the same over time. For twenty years AUCE has represented, at least to the activists involved in it, an intersection between feminism and trade unionism in British Columbia. Because the principle of local control over union decisions rather than joining a larger union hierarchy has been consistently maintained, AUCE and TSSU have frequently operated from a locally-defined idealistic feminist standpoint. The tensions, broadly painted, have been between feminists and traditional trade unionists (most often male).

Honorée Newcombe's article, "Coming Up From Down Under: A Hopeful History of AUCE" was written after an AUCE Local 2 strike in 1975. (AUCE 2 represented the clerical staff at Simon Fraser University, and has since become CUPE 3338.) The issue of wage parity between women clerical workers and tradesmen was

crucial then, as it still is now. Though men in AUCE 2 were in a minority, their responses to feminist organizing and feminist bargaining were seriously debated.

In "The Four Month Old Phoenix: A History of TSSU," Jacqui Parker-Snedker carries the history forward from the chartering of TSSU (AUCE Local 6) in 1976 to the 1983 Solidarity strike in British Columbia. While Honorée is hopeful that the men and women within AUCE will unite in spite of their differences, Jacqui suggests that the tensions between feminism and trade union organizing are more difficult to overcome. The effects of the Labour Code and the daily work of maintaining a union have led to both reexamining and reinforcing the role of feminism within TSSU.

The final paper, "Feminist Practice in an Alternative Union," by myself and Paul Reniers, brings that same tension forward clearly. Unlike AUCE 2, TSSU's membership is more than 50% male and has a significant number of members from among visible minority communities on campus. It also now has a thirteen-year history of independent union action. Yet the arguments about the intersection of feminism and trade unionism have continued.

AUCE and TSSU, as the "small unions that could," have a vivid and honourable (and intensely involving) twenty-year history. It is a history to be proud of.

Jill Stainsby

Cover by Sandy Shreve
Design and layout by Jill Stainsby

Coming Up From Down Under: A Hopeful History of AUCE

by Honorée J. Newcombe (1975)

There is a new union in BC.¹ Its name is the Association of University and College Employees or AUCE. AUCE is new -- its first membership drive began in the fall of 1972, and it is small -- there are only four locals: Local No. 1 at the University of British Columbia, No. 2 at Simon Fraser University, No. 3 at Notre Dame University, and Local No. 4 at Capilano College. AUCE is of special interest to us because it is composed mainly of women and because it was created by the members themselves to answer the day-to-day needs that existing unions did not.

AUCE has more than one beginning. Each of the autonomous locals was begun and maintained through on-campus impetus, but the primary source goes back somewhat further. In 1968, the Vancouver Women's Caucus was formed by a group of socialist feminists. Although they were originally a Simon Fraser organization, the Caucus women wished to become more community oriented and soon moved off-campus into downtown Vancouver. This move did encourage non-university women to become involved and encouraged the development of wider interest groups within the Caucus. One of these groups was the Working Women's Workshop. This group met to discuss their common problems as working women and tried to solve some of them collectively. They became

very interested in the trade unions and why they didn't do much for women. They felt that there must be a way through the trade union movement for women workers to attain status and pay equal to that of male workers, to improve both their salaries and working conditions. Since the existing trade unions did not appear responsive to these issues, the women pondered the possibility of forming a union largely composed of female employees. The fact that women are concentrated in a few occupations, often forming the bulk of the support staff of big institutions, could be a positive factor in unionization. Eventually these women formed a new organization autonomous from the Caucus called the Working Women's Association. In the spring of 1972, the WWA held a series of seminars on union organizing. These included sessions on labour law, writing constitutions, bargaining, strike tactics, etc. Present at these seminars were a number of women employed at the University of British Columbia.

Several attempts to organize the clerical support staff at UBC had been made since 1968 by the Canadian Union of Public Employees -- CUPE, and the Office and Technical Employees Union -- OTEU. These organizations failed to gain the necessary support from the small units of office workers scattered over the large campus. Some of the women who had been involved in the campaigns learned a number of valuable lessons. They now knew what they wanted from a union. First they wanted a union constitution that guaranteed equal pay and equal status for women. Second, they wanted local control, a more democratic union structure, so that information was available to all and decisions were under the control of members. Finally, it had become obvious that in order for a union to succeed in organizing on the spread-out campus, the staff must be systematically drawn into the drive in order to maintain momentum -- that publicity was

needed to reach the people in all those small departments. They decided they needed their own union which would represent the interests and problems of clerical workers within the university setting. They proceeded to write their own constitution and to begin organizing the Association of University and College Employees.

Some of the women working at organizing the fledgling AUCE were members of the WWA; the Association had gathered together the information necessary to begin drawing up constitutions and contracts, to start bargaining and negotiating. They were certain that as long as they knew what they wanted and what to avoid, a union could be set up by the members themselves without the help of paid professional union organizers.

AUCE was established as an independent union to represent the interests of the non-academic staff at universities. Each AUCE local is a completely autonomous unit, determining its own finances while at the same time province-wide support can be obtained if needed from the other locals (although each local has the right to refuse that support). Because AUCE is determined to keep the union executive from becoming an elite, no member may run for more than one office at a time and no one may hold office for more than two consecutive terms. The constitution states there are to be no full-time paid officials unless proposed at a conference and approved by the entire membership on a referendum ballot, and then the salary of that official may not exceed the highest rate earned by any member of the Association.

AUCE has been accused of being an all-female organization; this is not true, many men are members, but from the beginning, AUCE has addressed itself to problems which have been especially oppressive to women workers. The system of job classification is often quite arbitrary and inconsistent. The following excerpt from an

AUCE leaflet illustrates an all-too-common situation:

A UBC employee was interviewed by a senior faculty member for the position of his secretary. The former secretary was classified a III. He informed her that shorthand was not required since he used a dictaphone and, in fact, often found it most convenient to do dictation at home in the evening. The Personnel Department however, told her that, if selected, she would have to be a secretary II because she didn't have shorthand. Another employee with over five years' experience on campus inquired about an open secretary II position; she was told by Personnel that there was no point applying because she didn't have shorthand. Still a third was hired as a Secretary II and promoted to Program Assistant, with a higher salary than a secretary III. She also had no shorthand.

Just as familiar is the situation in which a candidate (usually male) from outside the immediate office area is given a supervisory position over equally well-qualified women already in the office. Or there is the clerk who is filling a much wider range of duties than her job description calls for, but who cannot get reclassified because "the budget won't allow it."

AUCE's first objective on page one of the Provincial Constitution is "to bring about fair wage standards and to assume uniform job classification with equal pay for comparable work for all employees, regardless of sex, age, marital status, colour, race, religion, or national origin." The second objective is "to bring about improvement in

the working conditions of members and to dedicate its efforts toward maximizing the opportunities for personal growth in the work situation of all members."

These objectives are designed to minimize the possibilities or problems within the union over equal pay and job opportunities. Also the emphasis on local control means that since the predominantly female clerical workers elect their own officials from amongst themselves, their needs (such as daycare and adequate maternity leave) have a proportionately large influence on the formation of AUCE policies and contracts.

While AUCE locals do have meetings of the entire membership, most work and discussion is carried on at the divisional level. It is easier to schedule regular meetings for small groups than for large ones and many working women who have problems getting to a large monthly meeting can easily attend a weekly or biweekly lunch hour division meeting and thus remain closely involved in the day-to-day discussion and decision-making of the union.

Once the AUCE organizers at UBC had drawn up their constitution, a membership drive was launched in the fall of 1972. This somewhat premature undertaking failed its target date, but in September 1973, AUCE initiated a vigorous publicity campaign, deluging the campus with leaflets, phone calls and newsletters. Once contacts were made they were followed up and many union members spent their coffee breaks and lunch hours explaining union objectives to anyone who would listen. This all-out drive gained its objective and AUCE was able to apply for certification in December. Certification was finally granted by the Labour Relations Board in April 1974, and after much negotiating, a contract was signed in the early fall.

Locals 3 & 4 at Notre Dame University and Capilano College attained certification very quickly with

the almost unanimous support of the staff at those institutions. Notre Dame has signed a good contract while negotiations at Capilano are still in progress.

As at UBC, there had been a good deal of internal interest in unionizing the clerical workers at SFU. Several of the women working at SFU were feminists who were interested in setting up a woman oriented union and who were in touch with the women who were working to organize at UBC. AUCE Local 2 at SFU was chartered in February 1974. Immediately they ran into competition from CUPE and OTEU who were seeking to organize on campus, and somewhat later from the SFU Staff Association, whose members decided to form the Association into a union. The Staff Association had the advantage of an already existing membership, but many of their members were supervisory administrative personnel and could thus expect to be excluded from any bargaining unit defined by the Labour Relations Board.

In the spring of 1974 the OTEU made an unsuccessful application for certification of 12 staff members of the Physical Plant and Planning. The Labour Relations Board ruled that the PP & P staff shared common employment conditions with other staff at SFU and "fractionalization" was undesirable. The same applied to an application made by the theatre technicians for separate certification made later in the year.

In June, the Staff Association applied for certification for a unit comprising all non-teaching staff at the University. AUCE made application a few days later with a bargaining unit consisting of secretarial and clerical employees only.

The Labour Relations Board scheduled a hearing to determine who should represent SFU staff and the nature of the bargaining unit. On August 24, 1974 the Labour Relations Board handed down its decisions on the applica-

tions for certification. An appropriate bargaining unit was defined as one in which clerical, secretarial and technical workers must be organized. AUCE's application was rejected as its unit did not meet this definition. The Staff Association was rejected as its membership included 40 supervisors, whose eligibility in such a unit was questionable, as well as 29 high ranking supervisors and professionals who were definitely excluded under the Labour Code. Also, there was some doubt as to whether the Staff Association membership actually represented people who wanted a union and the Association was therefore directed to sign up their membership anew, with the specific goal of forming a union.

Both AUCE and the Staff Association signed up enough members for certification purposes, so in November 1974 the Department of Labour conducted a referendum among SFU clerical and technical staff. Voters were asked whether or not s/he wanted to be represented by a trade union, and whether s/he wanted the Staff Association or AUCE Local 2 to be that representative. AUCE was elected as the legal bargaining unit and on November 22, 1974, became the certified trade union for SFU clerical and technical staff.

Negotiations began in early December, but most of the early sessions focused not on contract proposals, but on issues which challenged the basic structure of the AUCE organization. The University attempted to stop union leafletting and to severely limit the number of stewards. AUCE policy is that each and every union member be kept fully informed and be able to have a real input into union activities through a shop steward s/he knows and trusts to understand problems arising on the job since that steward works there (and encounters the same problems). The longest dispute in those early months arose out of the question of representation on the union contract commit-

tee. The president, Reva Clavier, and one of the division representatives, Percilla Groves, came from the same working area, a happenstance which greatly upset the University negotiators who apparently felt the section would be unable to function with both women absent at negotiations, although there were four other employees in the section as well as three librarians and student help available.

The negotiating teams initially met in the evenings although the University team preferred daytime negotiations as is the common practice. The union agreed to meet during the day providing the University made the arrangements so that employees on the contract committee could have time off work to attend negotiations. (AUCE is being billed for the time at meetings.) The University objected to Clavier and Groves being absent from work at the same time and suggested a return to night meetings. When the union objected, saying that, not only did this go back on the agreement but that night time negotiations were inconvenient and unacceptable when union people had been working all day. The University representative stated that he would be pleased to meet with union business agents but that employees are supposed to be working during the day. This attitude, totally at odds with the union policy of having only worker-negotiators, brought negotiations to a standstill.

On February 11, 1975 AUCE charged SFU with unfair labour practices, alleging intimidation of employees for engaging in union activity, since both Groves and Clavier had been told they would be suspended if they both went to negotiations at the same time without permission. This charge was shortly withdrawn, not because the union felt it to be unjustified, but because they wanted to try to get back to negotiating. Talks continued in the evenings and on weekends and on an irregular basis during

week days when Clavier or Groves could use scheduled time off to attend negotiations.

As negotiations continued, a split began to appear within the union membership. Not at first glance a very major split, but one that had some rather important implications. The split simply concerned the emphasis placed on certain aspects of the contract proposal which were of particular concern to working women, such as maternity leave. It became clear that while they agreed this was, of course, an important item, some of the men on the negotiating team actually regarded an extended maternity leave as a trade-off clause, something that could be exchanged for a more worthwhile concession. A violent argument within the union Caucus resulted in an agreement to maintain the union position. The University eventually gave way to the union in this matter. Several other similar minor differences arose and were fairly easily settled. None of these incidents amounted to very much, and although worries about a male/female split within the union continued to circulate, encouragement could be taken from the fact that no intentional malice was involved, but simply a lack of basic understanding of the special problems of working women.

Late in March, negotiators finally appeared to be nearing the all-important question of wages. A strike vote was taken at a general meeting. The union membership, feeling that the University was dragging its heels, due to budgetary problems, voted solidly in favour of giving the University a 72-hour strike notice. The hope was that this would not in fact mean going out on strike, but would speed up negotiations. There was certainly some immediate speedup, although this was short-lived. A one-day walkout occurred in early April (April 14, 1975), then negotiations resumed only to break down completely over wages. The union called a full-scale strike on April 28,

1975.

The University had offered the union a grade-by-grade parity with employees at UBC. AUCE Local 2 found this offer unacceptable for a number of reasons. First, AUCE Local 1 at UBC had settled their contract in September 1974, a contract which was retroactive to April 1974 and scheduled to end in September 1975 when their new contract would undoubtedly include wage increases. The SFU contract would be retroactive to November 22, 1974. Thus SFU employees would be accepting for the next year wages that had been in effect for UBC for the year previous. Secondly, SFU job classifications are in many cases quite different from those at UBC and a job-for-job comparison was almost impossible. Thirdly, AUCE at SFU included technical workers who at UBC were covered by other unions. These technicians (mostly male, on both campuses) received substantially higher wages than any of the clerical employees. Most technicians at SFU already made more money than most of the clerical workers; a parity settlement would give these highest paid workers a much greater increase than the lowest paid workers. This ran directly counter to the AUCE demand for a substantial across-the-board increase which would give a greater percentage increase to the lowest paid workers.

AUCE members knew they could not last out a very long strike. The vast majority of them were very poorly paid; many were women supporting families without savings or other financial resources to back them up. However, they hoped that in the short time they would be able to stay out, they might bring the University administration to a realization of how vital a part the clerical staff played in the functioning of the institution.

During the earlier one-day strike, students and faculty had been encouraged to cross the picket lines, thus creating a greater demand for services. This policy had been de-

plored by a number of traditional trade unionists within the AUCE ranks who considered the picket line to be a sacred thing in and of itself rather than a strategic tool. In the period of time between the two strikes many union members decided it might indeed be better to try to close the University down completely. Students and faculty were asked not to cross the lines. This failed. Most faculty and a great many students crossed anyway, enough to show that the union could not count on their support. And on the other hand, enough respected the lines and stayed away to keep the University from feeling the full brunt of the pressure trying to run things without the support staff. By the time the strike was over, most members seemed to agree that the traditional tactics of closing a place down by use of a totally closed picket line could not work against the University, and that in future such tools must be properly adopted for maximum strategic effect.

The male/female split within the AUCE ranks raised its head again during the strike period. For example, the traditional trade union line was taken mostly by male workers who had been in other trade unions (not totally, but the majority were male). In strategy meetings some of the contingent seemed to feel they should come to the fore and take over now that the time for action had come. At one strike committee meeting a male representative suggested that a certain percentage of each picket line should be male because they would be "more able to reason with people who might want to cross the line". However, over the course of the 10 day strike, most of these men came to appreciate that the women in the union were at least as capable of organizing and working on all aspects of the strike as they were themselves and were equally stalwart union members.

AUCE members returned to work in the hope that the University would return to meaningful negotiations. But the

University would not change its offer and would not provide AUCE with a costing of that offer.

AUCE applied to the Labour Board for the services of a mediator at the end of May, but before he could make any recommendations there was to be a larger struggle within the ranks.

The technicians within AUCE called a meeting to try to persuade the membership to accept the University's offer. Their reasoning was that there wasn't going to be a better offer and that, furthermore, it was unfair of the membership to deny those higher wages to the technical personnel by persisting in their demand for an across-the-board increase. It was encouraging that at this meeting more and more men stood up to defend AUCE's policy. Many of these defenders stated that, since joining the union they had become increasingly aware of the need to fight economic discrimination between the sexes. They had become aware of the need to raise up the wages earned by the lowest scale workers so that everyone had the necessities -- then you could start to gain the luxuries with the extra education, extra training, etc. That it *didn't* seem fair that a woman with all the clerical skills and years of experience behind her could be earning less than the janitors because she would "just leave and get married anyway". By the end of the meeting, not only had the motion to accept the University's last offer been defeated, a number of those who had presented the motion had voted against it.

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1. Some of the material in this paper came from a Peak article of the time. The references have been lost.

The Four Month Old Phoenix: A History of TSSU

by Jacqui Parker-Snedker (1993)

A history of any organization needs to begin "with where we are now" as an illustration of the organization's ability to base its construction of meaning and identity on descriptions of its historical choices and the attachment of these choices to the founding principles.¹ Such is the dilemma of the Association of University and College Employees.

The need to write a history is usually derived from the perception of a problem. From all current accounts a crisis in identity is the result of the problematization of the original charter. That is: is AUCE a feminist union?, should it be?

In their paper presented at the Pacific Northwest Labour History Association Conference, Jill Stainsby and Paul Reniers clearly show that 'where we are now' is still firmly placed on the feminist path defined and shaped by the founding members of the union.²

TSSU negotiations, as with representation, emphasise a non-hierarchical, organic structure. Negotiations are managed entirely by the membership and the member-staff. Outside consultants and negotiators are typically not hired. Collective bargaining skills are developed among the members.

As a result, the union's side in negotiations is entirely controlled by those with a direct interest in the settlement...³

Compared with the following, from 1979, there has been little change in the formula for direction:

- AUCE is organized on democratic principles, membership has control over actions taken by the union;
- locals within AUCE retain a higher level of autonomy than locals of other unions;
- the work done within AUCE is done by the members of the locals, who, if they are paid, are paid at the same rate they would receive if performing their regular jobs.⁴

Also included as the reason for choosing affiliation with AUCE (over CUPE) was that "AUCE has consistently fought for women workers."⁵ While this is not reason enough to declare a union feminist, intention is buried in the context of the founding of AUCE 2, with whom AUCE 6 was tightly connected. Therefore I will not focus on the last point, but leave that for the 'where they were then' section. The points of democratic involvement are inextricably tied to feminism and serve as an explanatory backdrop to a retelling of the history.

The Teaching Support Staff Union of Simon Fraser University was chartered in 1976 and certified in 1978, but even before the certification ink was dry the questions of affiliation and strike loomed large on the horizon. The first contract was negotiated with the university in 1980, after the affiliation question was settled for other locals, and for that matter other feminist

unions.

For the purposes of this paper I have divided the early history of AUCE local 6 into three sections. The first section will describe the organizing for certification. This will be followed by a combined segment on the 1979 AUCE 2 strike, the TSSU role in that strike, and the affiliation debates and the consequences for AUCE 2. Finally I will briefly discuss AUCE involvement in the Solidarity movement.

Current Questions and Background

AUCE was founded as a response to a perceived lack of interest and action on the part of mainstream unions on matters of concern to women workers. Women workers at universities and colleges were expected to accept, as a guide to the determination of their wages, wage level averages of the private sector where women were not unionized and had no control over their working conditions.⁶ AUCE organizers, in keeping with their declaration that "AUCE and the Women's Movement objectives are to bring about equal pay for work of equal value...", demanded that male and female wage levels be adjusted.⁷

There was some small measure of success in changing comparative wages but, as Percilla Groves noted;

When AUCE was certified the lowest paid workers in the unit earned less than 5/8 of the monthly salary of the lowest paid workers in the polyparty trade unions on campus despite the fact, that those jobs in the polyparty were unskilled, and the workers in our union had to have office skills. We argued very

hard that the skill, effort and responsibility involved in clerical and library work be recognized. By the end of our first contract we had succeeded in bringing salaries for our lowest paid full-time workers to the level enjoyed by the predominately male workers in the other campus unions in 1974 -- parity two years late.⁸

In 1978 TSSU membership "was at least fifty-fifty, (female/male)." This probably accounts for graduate student interest in a feminist union. Many women graduate students and TAs were also actively involved in Women's Movement organizing and they were as interested in making change in academic settings as elsewhere. From the formation of the Vancouver Women's Caucus, the Working Women's Organization and the Service Office and Retail Workers Union (SORWUC) to the founding of AUCE 6, some women saw trade unionism as part of the communal whole.⁹ Involvement in actions taken by AUCE were "seen to impact the women's community. [They] mobilized the women's community elsewhere who gave support."¹⁰

While there were those within AUCE 6 who were involved in the larger Women's Movement and the rewards of their work is seen in the affiliation of TSSU with AUCE, some of the credit goes to AUCE 2. TSSU chose affiliation with AUCE because of the perceived need for worker control in a union, because of the concerns expressed over lack of childcare facilities, and because of the need for gender wage parity. Michele Valiquette notes that "Local 2 did a good job [of] educating people on campus"¹¹

As can be seen, there were clear and concrete

contextual connections between the feminist identifier of Local 6 and the new kind of union organization offered by AUCE (that itself had specific roots in the labour movement). How then do we get from what has been described by many participants as 'the most exciting and positive time of my life' to identity crisis?

The identity crisis, 'feminist; to be or not to be'?, presents a particular face, which on the surface looks like and is perceived to act in the manner of a billboard. That is, how and why is a union that is now predominately male, feminist. Paul Reniers' concern that he, as a man, cannot represent women or speak for a feminist union has historical roots.¹²

Doubts about the organization's function and, presumably, ability to act arise not only from the founding moments but in all the points of crisis along the way. Identity is forged in the intermediary stages of organizational development. With each crisis, action, or response, AUCE local 6 made decisions and compromises that affected its self-perception as a feminist union. It is the events and discussions along the way that become the points or markers of change or shifts in perception that have lead some members to question identity and purpose, and it is on those moments that this paper is focused.

It is clear from reading the various accounts of the certification tale and from interviews done for this project that there were four significant events that had direct bearing on what AUCE 6 was and what it was to become. These were organizing for certification, support of the Local 2 strike in 1979, the affiliation debate of the early 1980's and the 1983 Solidarity actions.

While all of these events had a direct bearing on the feminist 'tag' it was probably the involvement in

Solidarity that caused the greatest shifts in self-identification. AUCE was not primarily focused on trolling union membership waters for feminist concerns, but the actions of the Bennett government forced coalitions on the left that denied difference. As women's experience of the work place was not that of men, AUCE participation in the trade union movement was based on difference.

The denial of difference resulted in specific groups subsuming particular concerns within the greater labour community. Once an organization (or an individual for that matter) agrees to set aside a primary focus of action for the greater good, it cannot be too long before that organization begins to question the validity of the original focus.

There have been discussions of the fallout of the failure of Solidarity Coalition and this paper will not attempt to add to them. However the Solidarity years of 1983-84 will be the last period examined because by then SORWUC had collapsed and several other AUCE locals had affiliated with CUPE or OTEU. It was a period of intense disappointment and disillusionment. AUCE connections with community organizations such as Women Against the Budget had raised hopes of success, but it became apparent that no matter how large and forceful the coalition it did not have the final support of 'organized labour'.

The failure of Solidarity deeply affected further participation of those who were active. "The energy was lost when the task was finished."¹³ There was a perception of elitism (and perhaps interference) "on the part of B.C Fed. who sent an ex- S.F.U. student to direct the Solidarity strike."¹⁴ After this, Jack Munro's flight to Kelowna precipitated a collapse of effective trade unionism and community activism, the effects of

which are still being felt.

The Road To Certification

In the fall of 1972 a group of women, many of whom had been involved in the Vancouver Women's Caucus, Working Women's Association (WWA) and SORWUC drew up a list of organizational principles.

They wanted a union constitution that guaranteed equal pay and equal status for women. Second, they wanted local control, a more democratic union structure, so that information was available to all and decisions were under control of the members.¹⁵

In a union where the majority of workers were women, the matters of local control and involvement of all the members was crucial. Democratic involvement of all members was also consistent with the socialist-feminist background of the organizers.¹⁶ These organizers, Jean Rands and Jackie Ainsworth, organizers of AUCE 1 (UBC), and representatives from OTEU were invited by Percilla Groves and Riva Clavier to SFU to talk about unions. They met in the pub.¹⁷ The AUCE presentation impressed their audience with the notion of a collection of locals as part of the larger effort of organizing women everywhere.¹⁸

In an organizing letter sent to the TSSU membership the structure of the newly forming AUCE 6 was represented as a direct mirroring of AUCE 2. It was stated that,

Because AUCE is determined to keep the

union executive from becoming elite, no member may run for more than one office at a time, and no one may hold office for more than two consecutive terms.¹⁹

This and subsequent newsletters also stressed the transient nature of TSSU membership, most being graduate teaching assistants, and the importance, because of the lack of membership stability, of the principle of local autonomy. This was in keeping with the feminist principles of AUCE 2 in that it recognized essential powerlessness (in this case, of graduate students) in the face of the academic hierarchical structure.

In September of 1976 TSSU was chartered as AUCE Local 6, but it did not win certification until December 13, 1978. The temporary nature of TSSU again played to its detriment and education and organizing took time, but by August 1977 TSSU had signed up more than 35% of its membership in a bid for certification. The application had to be withdrawn by January 1978 because the B.C. Labour Code changed the sign-up percentages to 45% before TSSU was granted certification. In the meantime however, teaching assistants were sent letters offering teaching positions for the spring semester.²⁰

In April application was made again, this time with more than 50% of TSSU signed up but certification was not granted until December because of a dispute with the university over "what constituted an appropriate bargaining unit."²¹ There was also a great deal of concern on the part of some Language Assistants who rejected two Labour Relations Board rulings that they were indeed included in the AUCE 6 unit.²² The new bargaining unit was immediately put to the test when it

was called to support the strike action of AUCE 2, just a few months after certification.

"Please Don't Cross This Line"

In March of 1979 AUCE 2 began a series of rotating strikes to protest the administrative footdragging on the issue of wages and wage parity.²³ On March 4 the library staff were informed by the administration they were locked out. SFU Library staff, along with technical workers and clerical employees, were members of AUCE 2. At this point in time the rotating strike action was abandoned and a full scale strike was called. Teaching Assistants were called upon to strengthen their negotiating position as a sister union by supporting AUCE 2.²⁴

Some members of Local 6 were anxious about supporting the dispute, and according to Michele Valiquette, there was a strong emotional response to the whole affair.²⁵ Women who had been actively involved in the women's movement wanted immediate removal of teaching support staff services but they met with some resistance from some of the men.

According to Valiquette there were four categories of resistance. One, foreign students were concerned they would lose their visas if they participated in the strike; two, although the union was now certified there was no contract to protect striking graduate students and teaching assistants; three, there were those who were not convinced of the value of unionizing anyway; and four, some of the male graduate students responded to the graduate experience as professionals-in-training and as such were not about to support those they generally treated badly in the daily course of academic life.²⁶

AUCE 6 joined the strike when several ameliorative

amendments to the action were offered: foreign students were not required to participate in the action, those who were involved in projects with perishable research (animals, plants and the like) could cross the picket lines, "that a statement be sent to the Administration saying that no student will suffer academic penalties for respecting the picketlines," and they would be given deferred grades.²⁷

In an earlier action an experimental approach to picketing was tried. This brief action was peculiar to AUCE logic. It was the feeling among feminist strikers that traditional methods of picketing would not work in an academic setting and it made sense to invite students across the lines to overload understaffed service areas rather than attempt to restrict access to the campus.²⁸

This approach was rejected outright for the larger strike by those with traditional trade union histories, and on March 12, TSSU was informed that crossing picketlines would result in disciplinary action.²⁹ It was not a case of a simple dismissal by traditionalists however. As Percilla Groves recounts in the following excerpt, police action at the picketline hardened union resolve to restrict access to the campus.

...They were doing what is done in any strike on the face of the earth; they were trying to prevent access to the place of business of the struck employer. For a time I was part of that group; then one of the Union executive told me I should stay on the traffic island because the Union would be less likely to receive an injunction limiting picketers if none of our members were in the group [which appeared to have consisted of many

differently affiliated university personnel].

I obeyed that order, and at 2:00 I was standing on the traffic island wearing a legal picket sign identifying me as an AUCE picketer. Bernard Curtin had already been dragged roughly into the police van. When I saw several policemen remove their hats I took that as a signal that some kind of action was about to happen.

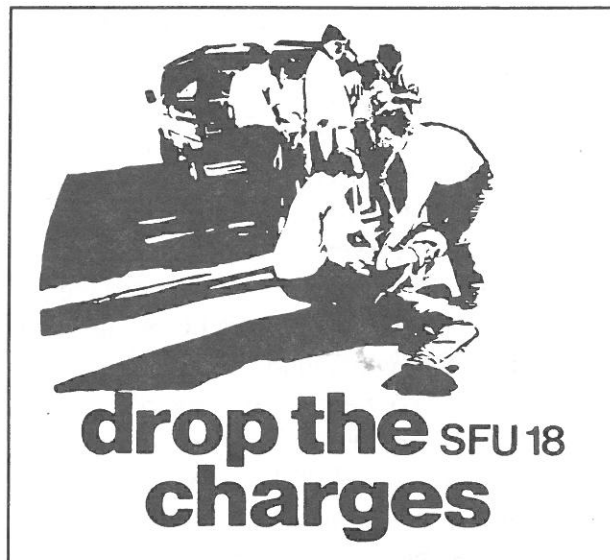
Still holding the belief that if you obeyed the law the police would not interfere with me, and thinking that I could somehow prevent the violence I saw coming by putting myself between the police and the supporters I took the hand of my fellow union members.

I heard no warning from the police but the speed with which they advanced made me fearful of the safety of the support group members.

To my horror the police without speaking advanced on the people and began shoving so hard that they were falling on me five deep. One policeman grabbed my shoulder jerking me so hard that I would have lost my balance had my friend not been holding my hand. I shouted at him to take his hand off me, that I was on a legal picketline. He ordered me to move back to the other side of the street.³⁰

Shortly thereafter Percilla Groves drafted a speech in which her opening statement, "Please Don't Cross This

Line'' was a plea for campus solidarity.³¹ But from this point on the strike was stylized as a war.³² Groves notes that in the interest of speedy negotiation AUCE reduced demands to those related only to wages, ''the union agreed to drop all non-monetary demands, mostly concerned with the rights of temporary employees.''³³



*The 1979 AUCE strike button.
Graphic courtesy Billie Carroll.*

Most of the temporary employees were women, a direct blow to the founding feminist principles, and while Local 2 was the primary striker, Local 6 was comprised of only temporary employees and could expect some kind of fallout. Both locals became more and more concerned with the legalities and definitions of the Labour Code, a common phenomenon of TSSU in the 1990s.³⁴

There were specific reasons for this that had as much to do with the demands to which the university would

finally acquiesce. One of these was the internal workings of AUCE. The university administration could not have failed to notice the acrimonious inclusion of the technical staff, a largely if not solely male 'division'. ''Men had no choice they had to join the union [Local 2]''.³⁵ Discussions on the inclusion of maternity leave as non-expendable right were difficult enough but when it came time for strike action the gender split became more obvious. Male workers believed that they should direct the strike action and tended to take a more traditional trade unionist approach.³⁶

This had direct consequences for Local 6. The relational ties of the sister unions went beyond a task oriented coalition. Many of those interviewed said the politically active in both locals worked, partied and were involved in personal relationships that informed and directed some of the action during this period. There were many men who actively supported the feminist foundations of AUCE but they were constantly at odds with the more traditional male membership.

Equally damaging to the union's feminist principles was the affiliation debate of this period that was possibly fuelled by the losses incurred during and as a consequence of the strike. There was a generalized feeling that affiliation with the CLC would provide some measure of security and provide a louder, stronger voice. But not all the membership agreed. Paul Reniers claims that the ''important issues identified by the affiliation committee define AUCE's feminism in that period.''³⁷

Conversely Michele Valiquette observed that the affiliation debate was divisive. The lines that got drawn were between so-called pro-feminist and pro-affiliation camps.³⁸ Some of those interviewed noted that many of the pro-affiliation activists were Trotskyists who were primarily engaged in promoting universal revolution

(feminist issues were to be addressed later).

For the purposes of clarity and colour the following section of an interview with Michele Valiquette has been included:

In the fall of '78 and the spring of '79 much of the [union] focus was on the strike, but the affiliation question came up several times and it didn't sound new. The results of the strike disappointed the union, it gave new ammunition [to those interested in affiliation, which] was used as proof of an earlier argument.

We talked about the need for greater resources, and the limits of what we could do on our own. But people who raised it [the affiliation question] seemed to have a larger agenda.... It seemed to be a politically correct thing to do to join with the CLC. The issue was important to the women's community generally. The issue was emotional because the affiliation argument was seen as an attempt to destroy a feminist union.

[On the other side] there was a naive view of the B.C. Fed. [and what it offered]. Getting up to talk at a B.C. Fed convention about feminism is rather difficult. Sometimes it feels as though we have to reinvent the wheel -- but maybe that is not a bad thing.

Perhaps all that was needed was patience, the Trots put things in this huge context, but the anti-affiliation side was too narrow and got bogged down in the day to day details. [There was] not enough discussion on what all this meant, not enough talk about what it

meant to be a feminist in a union and a feminist trade union. The bigger view is impossible to pin down. But we could have more power in the big group. As feminists too; have more power, with greater opportunity to link up with other feminists in other trade unions."

[AUCE 6 felt] our situation was so unique that there would not be a trade union that would understand. And we thought that since UBC affiliated [with CUPE]. This big issue was control of resources, the dues. It became clear that local 6 TSSU has more (funds) available than [the TAs at] UBC because money wasn't forthcoming from central [in the UBC case].

People were also committed to the idea of a feminist union. Those people who had chosen AUCE because of its feminism were still around and those who favoured affiliation were not. [This was partly because of the four-monthly restructuring the union goes through with every semester change]. Ultimately the affiliation question didn't have much effect.³⁹

On the larger scene (all AUCE locals), the internal friction was externally aggravated. AUCE members were forced to contend with the affiliation questions and defend feminism all over again. An article in *The Peak* revealed the ongoing anti-feminist sentiments of some of the AUCE members when Bob Anderman, an AUCE member and one of those pushing for affiliation, said "AUCE needs to stop being a women's caucus and become a real union. So far women have been

monopolizing the affiliation proceedings.”⁴⁰

Preceding the article was an editorial that warned students of union manipulation. BCGEU was, according to the editorial trying to take over the campus for its own ends. It was BCGEU, the article reminds us, that “got 18 SFU people, many of them students, arrested” in the March strike. SORWUC, according to the *Peak* piece was merely interested [in SFU] in drumming up support for the next strike, and the seven students actively involved in SFU politics only interested in paralyzing the campus.⁴¹

At this point in time TSSU was barely a month away from certification as AUCE 6. As a union independent of other AUCE locals, the repercussions for Local 6 should have been minimal. However, some of those involved in TSSU's drive to affiliation with AUCE were working with AUCE 2. Sara Diamond was the division representative from the Audio/Visual Department, and Sandy Shreve likewise then an AUCE 2 member, castigated both the *Peak* and Anderman for their thoughtless and ill-researched remarks. Both were involved in the attempts to certify AUCE 6.

Solidarity (for a while)

Most of those interviewed saw AUCE involvement in Solidarity as driven by outside agendas. There is a feeling generally that most of those involved in Solidarity on campus were naive about the trade union movement. “They (AUCE 2 and AUCE Local 6) worked on more local issues.”⁴² Besides, education contracts were typically out ahead of other groups.

We weren't seen as one of the strongest unions and they put us out first. As soon as

things started to heat up B.C. Fed. took over. They sent David Rice to one of our combined meetings. He arrived with this plan, plans for picket lines, he was an ex- Poli-Sci. student from S.F.U. and therefore was supposed to be an expert. He came with it all laid out and this was what we were to do. We grumbled but went along with it because we saw it as a bigger project. But we had pickets at the ends of parking lots - dangerous and ridiculous. It was also bizarre to be called to the B.C. Fed. “War Room”, that's what they called it, the war room.

AUCE 2 had voted down a recommendation to go out on their own contract. But two weeks later they unanimously voted to support the political protest (Solidarity), prepared to go a long way in what they saw as an issue that was bigger than any individual contract. [After Jack Munro made the deal] many people said we'll stay out - we're not going back over this...⁴³

Well, they did go back and most of the campus participants felt too demoralized to offer much energy to union or community work after that. Those interviewed felt that an enormous sense of loss and betrayal at the end of Solidarity. Some stated outright that it marked the end of the trade union movement.

However no one historical era ends abruptly. There are still whispers of that earlier dedication within the locals that used to be AUCE and the one that still is. The contract for Student Society Employees was based on the AUCE 2 contract. “It was a really good solid,

feminist contract. A fabulous contract in its day -- which has since been eroded considerably -- it was clear that it was a contract that was initially designed and fought for by women."⁴⁴

¹"Beginning Where We Are Now: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner, *Oral History Review*, vol 15 (Spring 1987) 103-127.

²Stainsby, Jill and Paul Reniers, "Feminist Practice In An Alternative Union," Presented at the Pacific Northwest Labour History Association Conference, June 5, 1993.

³Stainsby, Jill and Paul Reniers, "Feminist Practice In An Alternative Union," 49.

⁴M.M., "Organizing Graduate Students At SFU" *La Chispa*, No. 12, Sept 1979, 3.

⁵*Ibid*, 3.

⁶Percilla Groves, notes for speeches 1978-79, 12.

⁷Declaration of principles found in the AUCE Provincial Minutes of Monthly Provincial Executive Meetings, no date or number.

⁸Percilla Groves, Notes, 25.

⁹For further explanation of the WWO and SORWUC years read Jill Stainsby and Paul Reniers and Honorée Newcombe.

¹⁰Michele Valiquette, Interview July 28, 1993.

¹¹*Ibid*.

¹²Stainsby, Jill and Paul Reniers, "Feminist Practice in an Alternative Union," 36.

¹³M. Valiquette, Interview.

¹⁴*Ibid*.

¹⁵Honorée Newcombe, "Coming Up From Down Under", 4.

¹⁶Newsletter, AUCE 2, 1975, 1.

¹⁷Percilla Groves, Interview.

¹⁸*Ibid*.

¹⁹TSSU Newsletter, 1978. AUCE Archives, TSSU file.

²⁰M.M., "Organizing Graduate Students At SFU", 3.

²¹*Ibid*.

²²TSSU Archives, File; LRB Correspondence, multiple entries listed in the inventory log.

²³Percilla Groves, Notes.

²⁴*Ibid*.

²⁵Michele Valiquette, Interview.

²⁶*Ibid*.

²⁷Motions from TSSU Emergency Meeting (notes) March 12, 1979.

²⁸Percilla Groves and Honorée Newcombe, Interviews.

²⁹Peter Lane, letter to TSSU, May 6, 1993.

³⁰Percilla Groves, notes for speeches, 28-29.

³¹*Ibid*.

³²Percilla Groves, Interview.

³³Percilla Groves, Notes, 5.

³⁴Stainsby, Jill and Paul Reniers, 46.

³⁵Percilla Groves, Interview.

³⁶Honorée Newcombe, "Coming Up From Down Under," 13.

³⁷Stainsby, Jill and Paul Reniers, 42.

³⁸Michele Valiquette, Interview.

³⁹Second interview with Michele Valiquette, Summer, 1993.

⁴⁰Tricia Anne Webb, "\$9.00 an hour- What more do they want?", *The Peak*, November 6, 1979, 4.

⁴¹Editorial, *The Peak*, November 6, 1979, 4.

⁴²Second Interview with Michele Valiquette, Summer, 1993.

⁴³*Ibid*.

⁴⁴Alex Maas, Interview, September 1993.

Feminist Practice in an Alternative Union

by Jill Stainsby and Paul Reniers (1993)

Jill Stainsby and Paul Reniers were both staff members of TSSU for the time between 1989 and 1994. This paper was jointly written and presented to the Pacific Northwest Labour History conference in Vancouver in July of 1993. It is written in alternating voices.

Jill: The Association of University and College Employees has existed for twenty years. Our local, the Teaching Support Staff Union, AUCE Local 6, is the last remaining independent unit of AUCE, though two other locals survive as members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees and one survives as a local of the Office and Technical Employees Union.

AUCE was founded at a time when feminism was first struggling to move within organized labour. From that struggle came the recognition by working women of the need for unions established and controlled by themselves and in their own interests. Their initiative took root and has stood as a progressive counterpoint to mainstream unions throughout the last twenty years.

This presentation will describe the political context in which AUCE was created in the late 1960s and early 1970s and identify its feminist principles. An analysis of the issue of affiliation with traditional labour unions,

debated hotly within AUCE between 1979 and 1981, will demonstrate how those principles survived after ten years of practice. Examination of the current structure of AUCE's successor, TSSU, will show how these same feminist principles survive in the 1990s. We will look at an attempted organizing drive in 1992, and at current political discussions within TSSU.

One of the primary aspects of feminist thought is a critique of difference, and we should, first, acknowledge the many ways in which we each have differing backgrounds, statuses and access to privilege. I have worked with attempts to integrate feminist principles structurally into the bureaucracy and process of other organizations I have joined. I spent two years employed in a women's produce business that operated on a consensus decision-making model; I was a coordinating committee member of the BC Federation of Women in the early 1980s. I have been on staff at TSSU since 1989, as chief steward, co-chair of the last negotiating committee, secretary and coordinator.

Paul: I have participated in some organizations that openly advocate a feminist practice, or feminism in some form. In particular, over the last four years I have been involved in representative and leadership roles in a trade union which has publicly declared itself to be feminist. I have recognized in each of these roles that, as a man, I have had an experience of my workplace, its culture, and the social conditions which surround my work that is necessarily different from that of my women co-workers, and I have been aware that my ability to represent women -- and many other persons whom I have been elected to represent -- is severely limited, and that I can not speak with any authority about the feminist principles for which my union supposes to stand.

What then can I say about those principles? When

a union inherits feminist principles and practices, what happens when it is no longer dominated by women? What does a supposedly feminist union do with someone like me?

In an important way, I am not in a position to answer that. I do not think I'm qualified to judge what is a truly feminist union or what is truly feminist about a union. But I can say that I work in a union which has inherited a practice once based on feminist principles, and I can tell you how I perceive that heritage has made our union different from those which have always been dominated by people like me. Which is not to say that any of the things which I will talk about are exclusively characteristics of unions with a feminist heritage.

Jill: Feminism was just becoming a political force in society at large in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was in 1964 in the United States that the first anonymous paper was written on the topic "The Position of Women in SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee]," to which Stokely Carmichael made the famous response "the only position for women in SNCC is prone."¹ In 1973, a BC regulation that had been enacted in 1945 that prohibited women from lifting more than thirty-five pounds in the course of their work was repealed, resulting in more equitable access to employment in factories². The Vancouver Status of Women opened its doors in 1972. International Women's Year was still years away.

During this time, the Canadian labour movement and the NDP were debating the issues of socialism and nationalism. Many Canadian manufacturers were branches of American multinational companies. Some breakaways were beginning, but the majority of Canadian trade unions were locals of American unions, as many still are. An example of the kind of discussion current at that time, one that discussed Canadianism while ignoring women follows:

The problem of international unionism, if it is a problem, concerns academics, politicians, journalists, and some labour leaders. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to bother the man it is supposed to, that is, the Canadian working man. (emphasis added)³

Public ownership of the means of production was argued for by several of the left political thinkers of the time, as were independent unions and Canadian autonomy and pride. The NDP's Waffle faction was trying to increase the level of advocacy of government ownership of the means of production within that social democratic party. In one seminal text of left/labour ideology published in 1973⁴, six essays concerned political economy; three discussed left/labour ideology; one argued for the uniqueness of Quebec; and one discussed the status of working women, indicating an emphasis on political structures over social realities. The target audience was literate, politically thoughtful -- and, most often, straight, white, and male. In 1972's issues of *Canadian Dimension* and *This Magazine*, a few women passionately argued women's issues, to be apparently met with deaf ears, as there was typically no printed response to their discussions. The tenor of the time can be seen in the following description of a discussion of women's issues at an NDP convention:

The demand for women to be able to participate equally as political people was rejected in the form of the defeated parity resolution. The right of women to formulate discussions on their own condition was denied in the form of the composite resolution on women. And the semblance of the

women's debate to comic farce, to most of the delegates there, corroborated how little room men are willing to give women politically.⁵

To see these two perspectives, one presenting the worker as necessarily a man and the other arguing passionately for women to be respected politically, presented in the same political magazine in the space of less than a year, perhaps indicates the divided nature of the left/trade union community in terms of feminist issues. The rejection of a "branch plant" mentality by Canadian unionists could be, and was, extended by some activists to include a rejection of hierarchy and centralization within the trade union movement, and to a rejection, by some, of unions dominated by males. BC's AUCE and SORWUC were extreme examples of this grassroots, fiercely independent activism.

AUCE and its sister union, the Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada, were needed organizations created by and for women. The collision between labour and the feminist movement in the early 1970s produced these two, quite interconnected unions in BC. They were both created out of the Working Women's Caucus in Vancouver, starting in 1972. Activist women have called SORWUC the "small, gutsy union that took on the banks."⁶ It also organized day care workers, social service workers, clerical workers and restaurant and pub workers.⁷ The small group of women who were instrumental in its creation did some crucial organizing among women. Regrettably, the experience was too intense for the women to maintain. SORWUC lasted only ten years.

The Association of University and College Employees focussed on the underpaid women working in academia, many of them as clerical workers, and the

sessional teaching staffs at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. Locals were established at UBC, SFU, the College of New Caledonia, Notre Dame University, Capilano College and Alpha College. Local Nine, the University of Victoria teaching assistants, was chartered but never certified. AUCE Local 1 and AUCE Local 2's activism was grounded in feminist analysis, which was one source of many discussions within those locals.

A feminist perspective, in its simplest form, depends on looking at the world from a woman-centred point of view. Further, the theme that "the personal is political" runs through much feminist theory. AUCE was a courageous attempt to change the practice of traditional unions to include and respect women, particularly those women working in clerical job ghettos.

A definition of feminist practice involves, for me, taking what I consider to be a realistic assessment of the way the world is structured, and reworking it, so that there are no power imbalances based on categories. In other words, I perceive this society to be one in which people are structurally divided into hierarchies of privilege. I believe this to be self-evident. I do not restrict my analysis to gender only; certainly race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability or disability, age, family situation, and I am sure other defining characteristics divide people and place them at varying levels of autonomy and power within this structure. Gender is, however, paramount.

The main strength of feminism, I believe, is the ability to articulate this structure. I am not interested in establishing a hierarchy of oppressions, but rather in describing the global way in which hierarchy is implemented in society in the first place: that all these markers of difference are used to give some people power over others. Feminist practice, in the ideal, is an attempt to replace existing structures with ones that are fundamen-

tally opposed to status differentials, that empower each of us to act as autonomous agents, and to respect each others' differences. This is not to say that we do not act in concert with others. Certainly any practice that does not involve interrelationships between people and effective group decision-making would not meet the needs of any organization, let alone a member-driven one like a union.

Paul: An avowedly feminist practice has caused AUCE to remain independent, outside the House of Labour. Despite continually seeking solidarity with the labour movement, AUCE was not willing, as a provincial organization, to compromise its principles and practices in order to affiliate. The issue of joining the Canadian Labour Congress was decisive, however, in the histories of both AUCE and SORWUC. For AUCE, the debate also defined what set it apart from the mainstream of male-dominated unions.

The opportunity to join the CLC existed only if the locals joined already affiliated unions. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, the BC Government Employees Union, and the Office and Professional Employees International Union already claimed jurisdiction over clerical workers such as AUCE's. The CLC's Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union represented the same service sector in which SORWUC had members.

The affiliation debate was particularly intense within AUCE between 1979 and 1981. In the spring of 1979, a long and difficult dispute between AUCE 2 and Simon Fraser University resulted in 18 persons being arrested when a blockade formed at a picket line. The BCGEU later blamed AUCE for disregarding the BC Federation of Labour's picket policy. AUCE admitted its infractions, but, according to the SFU campus newspaper and the *New Westminster Columbian*, the action leading to the arrests was incited by a rousing speech at the picket

line given by then BCGEU General Secretary John Fryer.⁸

The strike was very costly for AUCE in terms of resources, the settlement that eventually resulted, and its relations with the House of Labour. The difficult relations with other unions likely both fueled and hindered the affiliation movement. The strike demonstrated the value of resources and solidarity, but its aftermath may have widened the ideological gap between the leaderships of AUCE and the CLC.

The AUCE provincial did examine seriously the possibilities of joining established CLC unions. Affiliation was discussed extensively with the membership, and an affiliation newsletter series was published between 1979 and 1981 in addition to the regular *AUCE Anchor*. The important issues identified by the affiliation committee define AUCE's feminism in that period.

The first principle, set out at the sixth annual convention in June 1979 and reaffirmed by a mailout referendum ballot in January 1981, was that AUCE be accepted as a full partner in the House of Labour; that it be accepted into the CLC as an autonomous union. Autonomy, specifically as seen in self-determination and the concentration of control at the most local levels, forms the basis for many other AUCE practices. Early on, before the establishment of a province-wide affiliation committee in the fall of 1979, then CLC President Dennis McDermott made clear in a letter to the AUCE executive that, "unless your organisation is prepared to adjust to the Congress structure," it would not be admitted to the CLC. The affiliation committee set about researching alternatives, in particular mergers with CUPE, BCGEU, and OPEIU. The union's principles, beyond autonomy, can be easily distilled from the questions they posed as they began their research.

In considering the issue of merger generally, and

merger with specific unions in particular, the AUCE provincial affiliation committee looked at the following concerns: aims and objectives of the union; the power of table officers; the distribution of power between local, regional, provincial, national, and international bodies; the representation of locals; trusteeship; methods for seceding; dues structure; disciplinary action; recall procedures; budgetary power over donations, special projects, and strike funds; steward responsibilities; the resolution of strikes, arbitrations, and internal problems; policies and programs of concern to AUCE members including maternity benefits, UIC, right to strike, and casual workers; and membership participation in decision-making.⁹

Local 2 affiliation committee representative Melody Rudd prepared a report examining union discipline and summarizing the views of a variety of members in the Office and Technical Employees Union (OPEIU), CUPE, and BCGEU on the previously mentioned issues. These views, selected and edited by Rudd and published in the affiliation newsletter represent AUCE's view of the response of CLC unions to these issues. Rudd writes:

...[D]uring the AUCE Local 2 strike last spring [the strike previously mentioned] I had met with some of the officials of these unions and felt I would not get a clear picture of what it is like to be a member in one of these unions from the officials, partly because these union officials never referred to the membership, or if they did it was with distain [sic]. When I think of the union membership I think of individuals who I know; the people I work with, the people I meet in committees and the people I see at membership meetings. When a

business agent thinks of the union membership, it seems to me, that they think of an unknown mass that can make or break their job.¹⁰

Rudd went on to cite discipline provisions in the OTEU, CUPE, and BCGEU constitutions which she said the members feared violating by discussing with her how their unions work.

The recurring themes of Rudd's quotes are the powerlessness of the regular members and women in particular, the concentration of power within central bodies, professional staff, and men, and the loss of autonomy at the local. Some grassroots members told Rudd:¹¹

'Membership involvement is low because you can't do anything as a member.... Only the executive can make decisions and even then most decisions are made only by the President and the Secretary/Treasurer.'

'Business Agents do things that are really against the membership. Issues such as flexible hours, being on joint committees, leisure time -- things that give people more control of their working space -- are poisonous to Business Agents as they fear it will make the workers happy and complacent, and they will be out of a job.'

'The big unions appeal is to members who don't want to have to make their union every day.... You are presented with a

service package and a contract package so you don't have to think of any issues.'

'It's going to be another hundred years before the House of Labour will consider striking for a woman's issue such as child care. The importance of AUCE remaining independent is that union bureaucrats must keep up with whatever AUCE may win and it helps women in other unions to see what is possible.'

'Going into BCGEU is like going into a mine field.... AUCE would... be tightly controlled.... It would be very hard to have any influence in CUPE - 260,000 members and there is no organization except at the top which AUCE is not going to touch.'

We see AUCE in the implicit alternative to the unions described in Rudd's quotes. The principles of membership involvement and empowerment, local autonomy, stringent controls upon staff, and the pursuit of a progressive and feminist agenda can be seen in the contrast. To a considerable degree, these are the issues that made AUCE a feminist union in 1979. But by the spring of 1981, AUCE Local 5 at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George had decided to split from AUCE and affiliate with the Confederation of Canadian Unions. Over the next ten years, AUCE Locals 1 (UBC) and 2 (SFU) would join CUPE, and 4 (Capilano College) would join OTEU until now the TSSU remains the only independent AUCE or SORWUC local.

Jill: The existence of this independent, autonomous union may not be favourably looked on by more traditional unionists, who would wish for a more cohesive, seamless labour movement. On the other hand, and more importantly, TSSU can represent a divergent union viewpoint. Feminism, grassroots autonomy and member-driven decision-making are all evidence of a political stance that can provide an alternative perspective to the traditional union movement.

TSSU was first certified in 1978 and achieved its first contract with Simon Fraser University in 1980. Its first and only strike was a one-day work stoppage on November 29, 1990, which resulted in substantial gains for its members. Its membership numbers approximately 1400, of which up to 900 are employed in the fall and winter semesters at SFU, and half that in the summer semester annually. All of its members (except for four continuing language instructors) are rehired each semester. More than 85% of its membership are graduate students.

TSSU's membership, since it was chartered in 1976, has consisted of people who teach at SFU, who almost all have at least one degree, and sometimes three. The membership numbers slightly more men than women. While the provincial objectives include the word feminist, the union has ceased to be run by and for women. Whether the word "feminist" is exclusionary or inclusive has become a recurring battle.

As I said, a feminist perspective depends on looking at the world from a woman-centred point of view. TSSU does not do this. Further, the theme that "the personal is political" does not give TSSU its focus. In doing the work of a trade union, TSSU is at least as concerned with legalities and definitions, particularly the Labour Code, past arbitrations, and the like, as it is with personal experience, beliefs and interactions, and how

those translate into activism.

Certainly there are historical reasons why TSSU sometimes tries to present a feminist alternative, in that AUCE was a courageous attempt to change the practice of traditional unions to include and respect women, particularly in clerical job ghettos. Current TSSU members' belief that feminism is a just cause also reinforces its use within the union.

Paul: But the legacy of the women who founded AUCE goes beyond a statement of objectives that sounds increasingly hollow in the union's current context. The alternative practices established in the early seventies and reiterated in the early eighties remain in varying degrees.

One alternative to traditional union hierarchies that has historically been based in feminism is the practice of local control. The current TSSU membership retains control of resources by approving all spending over \$200 and through an active and growing network of local committees. Members remain responsible for all activities of the union. The regulation of staff positions helps ensure control by the membership.

The union maintains three staff positions, each of them part-time, each having mandates in particular areas but with a large number of shared responsibilities, and none having authority over any other position. The staff make up a third of the executive, ensuring that they have a say in decisions which affect their work -- as we hope our members would have in their work -- but do not control union decision-making. Having staff participate directly in the governance of the union is only effective if they are elected directly from the membership each year.

Jill: One rationale for structuring the union in this way has been to keep the elected staff as in touch with the transient work force they represent as possible. This has had the negative effect of shortening our institutional

memory considerably; we are attempting to improve that situation by permitting staff, if elected annually, to hold office for four terms, as long as they do not remain in the same job more than twice. All three staff positions are part-time, as well, which avoids centralizing all information in one person. One effect of this division of labour is that members of both the staff and the executive take on all tasks and decision-making responsibility within the union, but are not compensated at a fully-employed level. This may be one reason that six of the nine most recently elected staff members have been women.

A further way in which the union membership is empowered in union decision-making and activities is the committee structure. This is undergoing revision at the present time, but currently there are six standing internal committees in the union -- grievance, contract, communications, staff policy, loan guarantee fund and education -- which are chaired by members, and typically consist of one staff member, one non-staff executive member, one steward, and a varying number of general members. There are also members sitting on university-wide committees with management. This decentralization has the effect of making more information available to more people, and giving them the opportunity to influence and vote on any decisions that are made.

Paul: This deconcentration of staff roles ripples throughout the union. The development of member's skills becomes very important both because members have a very active role in the operation of the union and because they must frequently choose skilled members from amongst themselves to take on the staff roles. The success with which this organizational structure has held together a union of part-time, temporary, and transitory employees with strong professional aspirations speaks to this practicality and efficiency.

Part of that success can be seen in the negotiation of collective agreements. TSSU negotiations, as with representation, emphasize a non-hierarchical, organic structure. Negotiations are managed entirely by the membership and the member-staff. Outside consultants and negotiators are typically not hired. Collective bargaining skills are developed among the members. As a result, the union's side in negotiations is entirely controlled by those with a direct interest in the settlement, not by those with an interest in the negotiating itself. The identification of the membership with the proposals and ongoing consultation further strengthen the negotiating team. The resulting contract is then clearly won by the membership itself rather than by professionals who do not work under its terms.



1990 TSSU Strike button

Historically, this non-hierarchical practice in negotiation has produced a very progressive agreement in terms of the protection against sexual harassment, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, benefits for same-sex spouses and in the area of technological change. Most recently, the 1990 negotiations resulted in smaller class sizes, a workload reduction, and pay increases that, when combined, amounted to a better than 36% per hour raise over three years. Not bad for the broad public sector these

days.

As in representation and negotiation, so in organizing. AUCE, through the TSSU, has most recently considered, or been considered, in three organizing bids. Though none has yet resulted in an AUCE certification, a recent attempt to organize Teaching Assistants at the University of Victoria serves to contrast contemporary AUCE organizing with that of a mainstream union.

A group of graduate teaching assistants at UVic, a potential bargaining unit very comparable to the current TSSU, decided to consider unionizing in the fall of 1992. In their investigations they contacted the TSSU, CUPE in Victoria, Steelworkers, and the Canadian Union of Educational Workers in Toronto. AUCE had charted a local for a similar bargaining unit at UVic in the early 1980s. An application for certification, however, was defeated at the Labour Relations Board.

The current UVic workers invited TSSU to make a presentation to them. CUPE, having responded to inquiries for information, convinced the group to hear a presentation from them as well. TSSU's plan to organize the bargaining unit included re-chartering the local, hiring local organizers from the unit with funds from what would be a newly constituted provincial organization. The TSSU would lend organizing experience and familiarity with labour relations and the academic context. Legal support had been offered on a pro bonum basis by TSSU's law firm of McGrady Askew Fiorillo.

In keeping with AUCE principles and practices reflected in the affiliation debate, the TSSU proposed to give workers at UVic the tools and support needed to organize themselves. CUPE's most persuasive argument, according to some of the UVic TAs who heard the presentations, was that, in an already foul post-secondary labour relations climate, a small union such as TSSU could easily

be overwhelmed by a contested certification bid. They pointed to the College and Institute Educators Association's experience at the Open Learning Agency, where an eventually successful organizing bid was burdened by litigation. If TSSU did manage to organize at UVic, the CUPE argument reportedly went, there may well be no union left to provide representation either at UVic or at Simon Fraser.

The UVic TAs chose to go with CUPE, and TSSU stood by its prior agreement not to interfere with the organizing drive but offer support if it could. CUPE brought in an outside organizer with little knowledge of the bargaining unit's peculiarities and who remained largely absent from the campus. The drive signed up fewer than one-fifth of the employees needed to apply for a certification and convinced many UVic TAs that unionization was not the way to go for them.

This failure highlights some of the virtues of AUCE's feminist practice. In organizing a unique workplace -- part-time, temporary employees with a near professional status but little power within their hierarchy and incomes levels below the poverty line -- the members' own skills, insight, and determination are more valuable resources than the networks, professionalism, and financial power of the mainstream, male dominated, and hierarchical national union. TSSU continues to offer support as an alternative to traditional union structures to groups wishing to organize, while at the same time respecting the rights of workers to choose their representatives themselves.

Jill: All is not calm, however, on the TSSU front either. Feminism has been a contentious issue in AUCE for its entire existence, and the current membership has continued this discussion. During a TSSU union retreat held last fall, there was great resistance expressed towards

the label "feminist": it was seen as exclusionary. It was seen, by some members, as privileging gender as a source of division and differing relative statuses. The fact that divisions based on gender disadvantage more than half the human race, and that it can therefore serve both as a very common example and as a paradigm for other differences, met opposition, but the union's feminist "tag," as those opposed to feminism would describe it, was retained.

At SFU, the international student community, many of whom are visible minority students, has been steadily increasing in size, and this has been reflected in our active membership. Unfortunately, visible minority women have remained in the background in terms of union activism. What has occasionally happened, probably partly as a result of this, is that gender and racial issues are seen by some as antithetical, rather than two faces of the same structural dividing point. Sexual orientation and disability are other issues that are often not paid attention to as much as they could be; this could perhaps suggest the need for more outreach.

Paul's Conclusion: In 1972, 1981, and in 1993, the need for an alternative to mainstream, male-dominated, hierarchical unions was asserted and reasserted by members of AUCE. What began as a union to be run for and by women in the early seventies established a practice of unionism that remains valuable today. Even though AUCE is no longer dominated and directed by women and no longer represents a predominately female membership, the practices established by AUCE and carried on through the TSSU connect the current membership with its feminist past. That connection provides an instructive reminder to mainstream unions that their traditions and practices come from a patriarchal culture and share the weakness of excluding in practice those whom they intend to include in principle.

As a man in an avowedly feminist union, I leave the articulation of feminist principles to those who can understand them best. As a committed unionist, however, I can see that the practice within a feminist union encourages the principles I believe most strongly: the strength of the worker and the elimination of hierarchy. A feminist union, in my experience, has room even in representative and leadership roles, for any male or female committed to addressing hierarchy in the workplace without recreating that hierarchy elsewhere.

Jill's Conclusion: AUCE and SORWUC have left a legacy of political activism and strong feeling among many BC unionists, particularly women. This framework of alternative organizing and fractious relations with each other and with the traditional unions indicates the intensity of the experience of that organizing. Feminism had and is having a necessary effect on labour, due largely to organizations like AUCE and SORWUC prodding the union movement to examine its biases. Much education needs to be done. The crucial discussion on racism continues. Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is just beginning to be examined in the traditional labour movement. Action must continue to be taken against discrimination on any (or all) of these bases.

Unionism is built on solidarity, and the attraction of the argument that there is strength in numbers cannot be gainsaid. On the other hand, a movement that allows for diversity within and between unions will attract more people, more perspectives and more energy. SORWUC's small numbers and intensity led to its downfall as an independent union. However, AUCE's and SORWUC's legacies remain in the form of an independent union, three CUPE locals, and an OTEU local. Members of both unions remain active throughout BC. AUCE and SORWUC clearly acted politically in spite of the tradi-

tional union hierarchy rather than in concert with it. The fact remains that the strong union solidarity exhibited during SORWUC's legendary Muckamuck picket line and during several university strikes has strengthened the union movement as a whole rather than fragmented it. AUCE was not a part of the House of Labour, but its members were certainly unionists and labour activists. Unions need to build on their victories, their experience and their energy to meet the challenges of organizing women -- and men -- in the 1990s.

¹ C.R. Berkin and M.B. Norton, *Women of America: A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979) p 402.

² B.C. Regulation 415/73, of November 14, 1973.

³ I. Abella, "The CIO: Reluctant Invaders" *Canadian Dimension* vol 8 no 6 (Mar/Apr 72) p 20.

⁴ R. Laxer, ed. (*Canada*) *Ltd: The Political Economy of Dependency* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1973).

⁵ Varda Kidd, "Sexism Prevailed at the NDP Convention," *Canadian Dimension* vol 8 no 1 (June 1971) p 7.

⁶ J. Ainsworth, A. Hutchinson, S. Margaret, M. Pujol, S. Perret, M. J. Rands, and S. Rosenthal, "Getting Organized...in the Feminist Unions," *Still Ain't Satisfied: Canadian Feminism Today* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982) p 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 137.

⁸ *New Westminster Columbian*, Wednesday November 21, 1979; *The Peak*, vol 41 no. 20, Friday March 23, 1979.

⁹ *AUCE Affiliation News* vol. 1 no. 1, October 15, 1979.

¹⁰ *AUCE Affiliation Inquiry* vol. 1 no. 2, November 16, 1979.

¹¹ *Ibid.*