

'FIGHTING THE BLUES'

What the Social Conservative Agenda Means to Women

The CLC 13th National Women's Conference



Conference Paper

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*The road ahead for change will not be easy for the Conservatives.
They will have to move very slowly so as not to alarm the electorate.*
REAL Women Canada “Election 2006 and Its Aftermath”

REAL Women Canada is a key partner in the alliance of social conservative groups which strongly supports the Conservatives. In this statement, REAL Women acknowledges that the future they have planned for us is something that will alarm Canadians. What is their agenda? Should we be alarmed?

“Social Conservatives to Sell Tory Daycare Plan”, read the headline of a Globe and Mail story on April 19, 2006. The Globe and Mail reported what many in Canada may have known intuitively. On April 3, the day Parliament re-opened—the Conservative government had met with far right-wing groups to strategize around how to convince the public that a taxable \$1200/year/pre-school child was preferable to setting-up a public system of early childhood learning and care. Their ideological base of support is really the far right. The most vocal critics of public child care come from small, fundamentalist religious—based groups; the Conservatives are relying on them to counter the voices of working families and child care advocates. And they now have a direct link to the Prime Minister’s office.

The Globe reported that to try and avoid negative publicity for Prime Minister Harper’s office, Conservative Senator Anne Cools organized the meeting. When questioned about the meeting, Sandra Buckler, spokesperson for the Prime Minister’s Office admitted that it had taken place, but refused to name the groups and individuals in attendance. *“The only thing I can possibly say is that we’re reaching out to all interested groups who agree with our child care plan”*, Buckler said.

Exactly which groups support the Conservative policy of parental allowance and oppose publicly—funded child care, and what are their objectives? REAL Women Canada was one of the organizations at the April 3 meeting. It describes itself as upholding the ideal that “*even in a changing world, every family, who so chooses, be able to look after their children in their own home*”. Hand-in-hand with this is the view that women staying at home to raise children are making a “*career choice*”, as well as a—

Long-term investment in the well-being of their children and in the future stability of the next generation. A full-time mother makes a significant contribution to society by contributing psychologically and emotionally to the well-being of her children and also economically in that her full-time care of the child negates the need and costs of outside day care services (Statement on Child Care).

This dedication to the role of motherhood should be encouraged, not discouraged, by our tax laws and legislation (Canada’s New Women’s Movement).

Placing women in the paid workforce has consistently been a priority in Communist countries. This also appears to be an integral part of Canada’s current policy (Who’s in Charge of the Family?).

According to REAL Women then, a woman’s proper place is in the home, she should be encouraged to stay there and those who support a publicly-funded, safe, and accessible child-care system are Communists.

Another organization in attendance at the meeting was the Canada Family Action Coalition. On the front page of their website there is a similar message:

Canada does not need another socialist “care” system. Health care, the socialist monopoly is inoperable the way it is. Public education, another attempt at monopoly is a disaster. Now, the socialists want a Soviet style attack on the family. Support the plan to help parents with freedom and choice—\$1200 direct to parents.

Let the current daycare operators operate and compete—keep the government and unions out of free market provision of good service.

Socially conservative groups clearly understand that the Conservative policy to provide a family allowance instead of building of a public child care system is an entry point to a host of controversial positions touching all working people in Canada:

- ▶ the proper role of women and men in society;
- ▶ the role of social services, like health care, child care and public education;
- ▶ the role and legitimacy of unions;
- ▶ family policy including support for single-income, married, heterosexual couples and opposition to birth control, sex education, choice.

Unraveling Conservative arguments favouring direct allowances for parents *instead of and as opposed to* public child care helps to lay bare their vision for Canada in the context of growing inequality between rich and poor, and persisting inequalities between women and men.

Income Inequality in Canada

Over the past fifteen years in Canada, as in most countries around the world, incomes of the most well-off families have been climbing steeply, while incomes of the majority of families have been in decline, or increasing very little. Between 1989 and 2001, the top 20 % of families in Canada (defined as households of two persons or more) saw their annual market income, or pre-tax income drawn from employment and small investments, grow by 16.5 %. In the same period, the poorest 40% of families in Canada saw their annual market income fall by 10.9 %, and the middle 40% saw their annual market income rise by a mere 8%.

The Reality for Working Mothers

In 2004, 65% of women with children under the age of three were employed in the workforce, twice as many as in 1976. For women with children under six, 70% were self-employed or employed in the workforce in 2004, up from 37% in 1976. These numbers reveal a process of social change which should find a reflection in social policies to support working families.

Since the 1960s, women increasingly came to see it as their right and responsibility to participate in the shaping of society. Women came together to demand access to birth control and safe, legal abortion. They fought to be able to stay in school and to attend college and university. They entered the workforce in large numbers. They joined trade unions. Women shared control of the finances inside the home, so that family spending decisions could be made jointly rather than dominated by a single income earner. They won maternity leaves and benefits which allowed women time to pause from their jobs for childbirth without loss of the economic power afforded to them by their employment. And women called for

affordable child care, which had been seen as the primary responsibility of individual women.

As women's groups and unions won maternity benefits through the Unemployment Insurance Program in 1972, employment protection for pregnant workers in 1973, and a certain number of subsidized, regulated child care spaces through the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), more women joined the paid workforce. By the end of the 1970s, women's wages came to be seen by both women and men as a crucial part of family income, especially as men's real wages began falling—a decline which continues today.

In the early 1980s, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recognized that universally accessible child care is indispensable for women's equality. Public awareness of the needs of working women and the benefits of quality child care for the children of working families increased. Twenty-five years ago, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommended that the federal government fund a national system to provide quality child care for all working families.

In response, the federal government instead created the Foreign Domestic Movement Program (now called the Live-in Caregivers Program), allowing more well-off families to bring workers from outside of Canada to live in their homes and care for their children. The racism of Canada's immigration policies ensured that the women employed through this program were women of colour largely from the Philippines and the Caribbean. Live-in caregivers earned little for their caring skills—minimum wage or less. Given the power imbalance caused by the live-in aspect, employers typically took advantage of their services. And, most working families simply could not afford the expenses involved. At the same time, growing numbers of working families through the 1980s

found themselves unable to qualify for child care subsidies through the CAP.

In the 1990s, along with funding cuts in the areas of health and education, the federal government also cut funding for subsidized child care covered in the CAP. Between 1996 and 1998, \$8.2 billion were cut from social programs. Child care subsidies were reduced and many low-income families no longer qualified. Between 1992 and 2001, the number of regulated child care spaces in Canada increased from 371,573 to 593,430. But, 70% of these spaces were created in Quebec, where a provincially funded, \$5.00 a day, child care system was established following years of pressure from women's groups and unions. By 2001, the country as a whole was **short some 2,715,570 regulated child care spaces**. Only 17.9% of children under the age of 12 had access to government regulated child care. In provinces like Saskatchewan, the figure was as low as 4.2%.

The Conservative solution to this severe shortage of regulated child care spaces is to establish policies that would result in encouraging and pressuring mothers to raise pre-school children within the home and not in non-profit, quality child care centres—to the delight of their social conservative friends and allies.

While some women may prefer to remain at home with their children, many want and need to work outside the home. Government policies which support women and their families if they wish to stay home while children are young can be positive developments.

Reforming the unemployment system to increase access to maternity and parental leave and increasing the level of income benefits available is one option to meet this need. However, when the Conservatives eliminate the funding for programs like a national, accessible, quality child care system; when they characterize our child care centres as “*institutions*” and “*Soviet style*”; when they combine this with an ideological attack on working women based on the notion that raising children in the home is the “*best*” way; when government statements are designed to make working women feel guilty and negligent—then the agenda is clear and dangerous for working women. Right-wing social conservatives see the Conservative plan to provide \$1200 a year to parents for each child under six as a first step towards their goal of re-establishing the “*traditional family*”—where men are men and women are women. Instead of maintaining the plan to provide \$5 billion over five years for provinces to begin establishing a national system of quality care and early education for children, initiated by the Liberals in their final months, parents are told they now have “*choice in child care*”.

Choice in child care when we are short more than two and a half million regulated child care spaces? Choice in child care when parents are given about \$23 a week (before taxes) to pay for it?

The far right-wing vision is to use federal dollars to create incentives for working women to leave the workforce to care for husbands and children— woman’s proper sphere.

Who Are These People?

The **Institute for Marriage and the Family Canada** opened office in Ottawa in March 2006, just after the Conservative election victory. According to their website:

Family is the foundation of our society. The health of our children, communities and nation depends on strong families. The aim of society and government policy should be to protect and support this foundation.

The Institute therefore claims to conduct, compile and present “the latest and most accurate research to ensure that marriage and family-friendly policy are foremost in the minds of Canada’s decision-makers.” The **Institute for Canadian Values** aims for “greater representation of religious and moral consideration in government policy.” As stated in their website,

By collecting and disseminating the best of Canadian and foreign commentary consistent with our perspective, by gathering independent research on the issues and making it readily available, and by offering practical training for those who wish to become more actively engaged in the democratic process, we hope to provide both private citizens and public officials alike with the knowledge and tools they require to make knowledgeable decisions. (Emphasis added.)

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Minister of Public Safety, Stockwell Day, and independent backbencher Pat O’Brien, who quit the Liberal Party because of its support for same-sex marriage, are all members of this Institute.

In 2004, **Focus on the Family**, an evangelical American group counting 2.5 million members opened an office in Ottawa, with a staff of nine and budget of \$11 million. Though the group had been operating in Canada since 1983, out of an office in Langley, B.C., in the last several years it began receiving considerable funds from across the border, leading to the establishment of its presence in Ottawa. Focus on the Family is a leading opponent of gay rights in both Canada and the US.

The newly formed Defend Marriage Coalition, which opposes equal marriage for gays and lesbians and “institutional child care” lists the following groups as members: Campaign Life Coalition, Enshrine Marriage Canada, United Families Canada, REAL Women of Canada, Catholic Civil Rights League, Marriage Canada, Equipping Christians for the Public-square Centre, Associations des parents catholiques du Quebec, Canada Family Action Coalition, Preserve Marriage—Protect Children’s Rights, United Mothers and Fathers, Equite—Famille. Like the Institute for Marriage and the Family, these groups are *opposed to the legal extension of civil marriage to same-sex couples and a public child care system in Canada.*

Extreme right-wing groups have pressured the Conservative government to increase the allowance for “*support for families*” and have achieved a victory in the government’s announcement of the \$1200 child care payments. This will encourage them to lobby for further incentives to make it more economically viable for mothers to stay at home and for incentives to make it less economically advantageous to work. For example, they are pressing for the tax rules to benefit single-income families as compared to individuals and double-income families.

Given the lack of much-needed, enhanced social support for working mothers, clearly, the Conservatives “*value*” stay-home mothers well above mothers in the workforce.

The Truth about the \$1200

Of course, the first measure in this agenda was introduced in the budget in the form of the \$1200 so-called ‘Universal Child Care Benefit’. When we examine the taxable aspect of the payments, the ideological choice to promote private child-rearing within the home for single income families becomes clear. As the allowance is taxed on the lower-earning spouse, single-income couples in four out of six income categories receive the largest benefits. Single parents and dual-income families receive much less. A closer look at the numbers shows the impact.

Net Family Income	Gross parental allowance	Cash in hands of family
\$30,000		
single-income couple	\$1200	\$432
single parent	\$1200	\$301
dual-income couple	\$1200	\$199
\$40,000		
single-income couple	\$1200	\$682
single parent	\$1200	\$481
dual-income couple	\$1200	\$554
\$50,000		
single-income couple	\$1200	\$796
single parent	\$1200	\$810
dual-income couple	\$1200	\$815
\$75,000		
single-income couple	\$1200	\$790
single parent	\$1200	\$721
dual-income couple	\$1200	\$887
\$100,000		
single-income couple	\$1200	\$862
single parent	\$1200	\$698
dual-income couple	\$1200	\$826
\$200,000		
single-income couple	\$1200	\$1,076
single parent	\$1200	\$522
dual-income couple	\$1200	\$679

(Caledon Institute, 2006)

And while, the Conservatives say they also intend to create child care spaces, their plan to do so through tax incentives for businesses and community organizations simply won't work. First, the tax incentive is only for capital costs. There is no funding to operate a child care centre after it is set-up. It is also not clear that these incentives will be directed toward the creation of regulated spaces, which follow government—approved safety and other standards. To date, in all provinces, virtually all government supported child care spaces are regulated to ensure that children are well looked after. In the mid-1990s, the Harris government in Ontario offered the same tax incentive plan and no additional spaces were created. In Quebec and Ontario, the growth of workplace child care centres occurred when public funding was made available for the creation and day-to-day operation of new facilities.

Our Answers: Public Services to Support Our Communities

Historically, working people have fought for public services to allow for the greatest numbers to share in services needed by all—healthcare, public schools and city buses, for example. Non-profit, publicly-run services mean that improvements in service provision benefit the majority, not just those who can afford them. Regardless of the service, a public, non-profit system, operated and maintained through democratic decision-making, is likely to best promote accountability and make the best use of collective talents, resources, experience, and new ideas.

The results of a recent study conducted by YWCA Canada demonstrate what this could mean in the case of a national public child care system.

In 2005, the YWCA brought people together in four Canadian cities to create community blueprints for early childhood learning and care services. All shared a common vision for quality, accessible, inclusive, and integrated early childhood learning and care opportunities for all children.

According to this model, communities need:

- Integrated or coordinated neighbourhood services for children in the early years and for their families;
- Stable funding to achieve the goals of quality, affordability and accessibility for all children and families, regardless of financial status;
- Public, non-profit sector operation;
- Accessible and central services located in public facilities such as community centres, neighbourhood houses, schools or purpose—built child care centres;
- Recognition of the diversity of families and communities, as well as a common interest in the well-being of all children, including children with disabilities, and all families;
- Opportunities for parent involvement;
- Well-trained and well-compensated professionals;
- Partnerships with community resources (i.e. schools, libraries, art galleries, recreation facilities, museums) to extend children's learning opportunities.

The elements of an ideal early childhood learning and care system developed through the YWCA consultations and the approach of the child care community reflect a number of significant cultural changes in Canada over the past forty years.

Through greater immigration of people from all over the world and the struggles of immigrants and their children, Canadians of all shades have come to recognize the value of reaching across cultures and learning from each other. Community-based early childhood learning and care would allow this process to begin in the pre-school years.

The labour movement has always argued that Canadians, regardless of class, have a right to quality education and training. For example, we fought for public education so that all children would benefit. A child's early years are critical for intellectual and social growth. Early childhood education programs would extend Canada's highly successful public education system and lessen the disadvantage that working class children face if their parents cannot afford to place them in expensive privately-run programs.

It is now widely acknowledged that learning begins at birth and has a profound effect on life-long development and adult well-being. We also know that quality child care promotes healthy child development at the same time as it supports families, reduces child poverty, advances women's equality and deepens social inclusion. Experts agree that a high quality, inclusive child care system provides all children with excellent learning opportunities to optimize their physical, cognitive, cultural, social and emotional development; experts also agree that development suffers when children experience poor quality care.

Similarly, unions have been centrally involved in the struggle to preserve and extend our public health care system. We do not believe that individuals and families should be able to access health care based on their ability to pay. We see the health of individuals in our society as a **collective concern** and a **collective responsibility**.

We also support initiatives like unemployment insurance and social assistance for the same reasons. It is society's collective duty to ensure that all its members are taken care of based on fairness and equality.

For social conservatives, on the other hand, the family unit is a community in and of itself. In turn, the **individual** family is the key site for educating the young, caring for the elderly and family members with disabilities, building relationships, and creating solidarity regardless of each individual family's means or access to resources. Public institutions are seen as *interference* in the family and a violation of "*individual rights*".

Why? The concept of social responsibility, based on the political ideals of human rights, equality, protection from discrimination has begun to put old beliefs and practices into question. For example, the Thames Valley Ontario School Board's decision to implement a Sexual Diversity Action Plan, and the Hamilton-Wentworth Ontario District School Board's development of an Equity Policy are both seen by REAL Women of Canada as "*sympathetic indoctrination*" to replace "*family*" teachings of "*hard truths of moral values*."

Women's Economic Inequality

Extreme right-wing advocates actually view increasing incentives for mothers to remain at home as a solution to income inequalities that continue to exist between men and women. An Institute for Marriage and the Family Canada policy paper entitled "*The Child Care Conundrum: the Response from Canadians*" argues that the lower salary and benefit levels of working mothers relative to working fathers is a "*further financial burden to the family*" which can be "*overcome*" by mothers staying out of the workforce and caring for children. If you remove women from the workforce, there will be no wage inequality. There will be higher levels of poverty and financial hardship, but no wage gap.

Rather than advocate for proactive pay equity legislation to ensure that women are paid fairly on the basis of the value of their labour or employment equity to remove barriers in the workplace for equality seeking groups, the right-wing's vision is a return to the single breadwinner family structure of the 1950s. There is not even recognition

of the fall in real wages experienced by men in North American since the 1970s. This position would undo the relative financial freedom gained by women in the past thirty years. It would also have very serious detrimental effects on family income levels and economic growth.

Statistics Canada (2006) reports that if women's earnings were eliminated, the number of dual income families living below the poverty line would increase from 120,000 to over 400,000—almost triple the number. Lower labour force involvement of women would dampen economic growth in Canada, as baby boomers retire and the supply of labour fails to keep up with increasing demand.

On average, women still earn less than men regardless of their occupation, age, or education. Today, a woman earns 72.5 cents for every dollar a man earns. Workers of colour and Aboriginal workers also face wage gaps compared to white male workers. For women in these groups, the gaps are even larger. The federal government's Pay Equity Task Force reported in 2004 that the wage gap for women of colour is 64 cents on the male dollar; while for Aboriginal women it is a staggering 46 cents.

Women earn lower wages because the work that women have traditionally done has not been considered as valuable as "*men's work*", regardless of the skill levels involved. Taking care of children and elders, performing clerical tasks, cleaning houses and offices and teaching are examples of work that is undervalued and underpaid. This devaluing of "*women's work*" can be explained by many factors including sexism, racism, the lack of women in political positions and occupational segregation.

Proactive pay equity legislation would require public and private sector employers to examine their pay structures for systemic discrimination in wages.

The Realities of Families in Canada Today

The following figures tell of a range of families and family situations:

In 2001, 48% of women aged 15 and over were partners in a husband-wife family, down from 56% in 1981.

Between 1981 and 2001, the proportion of women living in common-law relationships increased from 4% to 9%.

20% of families with children in 2001 were headed by a female lone parent, double the figure in 1971.

Aboriginal women have on average 2.6 children (compared to 1.5 for all Canadian women).

34% of women aged 25-44 worked part-time because of child care responsibilities; 55% of all working immigrant women work on a part-time basis.

Women with disabilities who have children had a disproportionately higher rate of unemployment than women with disabilities who did not—and 40% of women with disabilities were employed as opposed to 69% of able-bodied women

75% of workers experience high levels of work-family “overload”, and women are still doing more household work and child care than men

13% of workers are responsible for a relative with a disability.

60% of workers have elder care duties, with women allotting around five hours a week.

Workplace Policies to Support Working Families

Rather than complete reliance on the family for social support, labour fights for social and workplace policies to help support families today. These include:

- Enhanced maternity and parental leaves under the Employment Insurance system so that all parents can benefit. Only 18% of women earning \$20,000 a year, and 42% of women earning \$30,000 a year now qualify for maternity and parental benefits. The new Quebec Parental Insurance Plan on the other hand, covers all workers—whether salaried or self-employed—who earn a minimum of \$2000 a year. Coverage is for maternity, paternity, parental and adoption leaves. The program offers options in terms of length of coverage and benefit levels. For example, eighteen weeks of maternity leave at 70% of average weekly income or fifteen weeks at 75% of average weekly income—without a waiting period.
- Adequately funded, universal public health care, pharmacare and day programs for the elderly and people with disabilities—to assist in the caring of the entire family and relieve stress on caregivers.
- Improved funding for universal and quality programs such as child care and after school programs.
- Workplace policies allowing options for working parents, including four-day work weeks, compressed work weeks, flexible work hours, voluntary time reduction, schedule accommodation to meet school hours, long notice period for shift changes, limits to on-call and overtime work, shift swapping, negotiated home-working and job-sharing, reduced hours for nursing mothers.

- Paid caring leaves requiring little or no notice, for workers to attend to emergencies, illness, and household and family appointments. Workers in Canada need an additional ten to twenty paid days in caring leave.
- For women escaping violence in the family, personal leaves of absence from employers, income replacement under the Employment Insurance system, and full public funding for emergency housing.
- Full implementation of the recommendations of the government-appointed Pay Equity Taskforce of 2004—including the adoption of a proactive pay equity law—to improve the incomes of women and other equality-seeking groups.

Defending Human Rights and the Charter

REAL Women of Canada and their allies, including key members of the Conservative government, find it problematic that Canadian courts and human rights tribunals have ruled in favour of disadvantaged groups using the laws to challenge discriminatory practices. They are very unhappy with the positive role of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in furthering equality rights in Canada, changing public institutions and practices and transforming Canadian society.

They often disguise their opposition to equality and human rights by attacking "*activist*" judges whose job is to interpret the laws. They launch heated attacks on "*judge made*" law and claim judges are taking over the role of Parliament. They conveniently forget that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was passed by elected Canadian governments.

A REAL Women of Canada position paper claims that human rights advances are in opposition to Christianity:

Christianity is now under serious attack in order to push it out of the public square so that religious beliefs will cease to play a significant role in determining public policy.

The Institute for Marriage and the Family makes similar connections between Christianity, family, and Canadian values in a policy paper entitled “*Family: the Natural Starting Point for Canada’s Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*”:

In 1947, Louis St. Laurent, then External Affairs Minister, gave his landmark “Gray Lecture” at the University of Toronto. St. Laurent outlined the values underlying Canada’s foreign policy...national unity, political liberty, the rule of law, the values of a Christian civilization (which includes the integral importance of the family), and the acceptance of international responsibility.”

Not all religious communities of course, oppose the evolution of human rights law. Groups such as the United Church of Canada, the Quakers, the Unitarians, the World Sikh Organization for example, have all supported human rights advances including the extension of equal marriage rights to gay men and lesbians.

Social conservative religious groups however, are pushing their view of Christianity as one to which all public policy must relate. In recent years, the Gideon Society and other Christian organizations have been re-immersing themselves in the Canadian public school system. Though prohibited from operating in most public schools over ten years ago, the Gideon Society approached the Abbotsford School District in B.C. and the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board in 1998 and 2005 respectively, requesting permission to offer free copies of the New Testament to Grade 4 and 5 students. In April of this year, the Globe and

Mail reported that a provincial ban on bible distribution in New Brunswick schools had been lifted.

Unlike their social conservative allies, the Conservative Party does not make specific reference to Christianity in its official pronouncements. The possibility remains however, for the Conservative government to bring together a multi-cultural mix of traditionalist religious leaders and groups to challenge progressive values and social change at the federal policy levels.

Stephen Harper made such an appeal in the 2004 election to “*ethnic communities*” to support his opposition to equal marriage rights for gays and lesbians. In February of this year, the Manning Center for Building Democracy (an organization of former Reform Party leader, Preston Manning) hosted a three-day conference in Ottawa entitled “*Navigating the Faith/Political Interface*”, which drew together student and community groups and included a focus on new Canadians.

In describing its constituency, the Institute for Canadian Values (which counts Stephen Harper and Stockwell Day as members) suggests a similar, multi-cultural strategy:

Our members and supporters adhere to a set of principles that find their roots in traditional Judea-Christian moral and intellectual teaching. Not all of us are religious—in fact, some of us even profess faiths other than Judaism or Christianity. But, we all agree that the principles embodied in these teachings form the foundation of western civilization and Canadian democratic society.

As a result, we cannot oversimplify the diverse makeup and rationale of the Conservative government. Instead, we must maintain a pragmatic tone when examining the relationship between social conservatives and the Conservative government.

A second front of attack from these social conservatives is against the groups and individuals who support positive social measures such as a national child care system. REAL women repeatedly decries equality-seeking women's groups and challenges the limited financial support they receive from Status of Women Canada. They have launched Freedom of Information requests, implying that women's advocacy organizations have misused federal funds. We can expect them to launch an all-out campaign either to severely limit Status of Women's budget or to abolish the department entirely.

They also attack unions for our support of issues like child care. These groups argue that unions are only interested in improving child care programs so that we can organize child care workers and collect their dues. They do not agree that labour's support for child care is based on our understanding of the needs of working women and working families. They also deny that our campaigns to organize child care workers into unions are based on our understanding of the situation of severely undervalued and poorly paid-child care workers. Part of the reason for our support for a federal financial commitment to child care is to improve the wages of these workers. The Saskatchewan government for example was planning to use a portion of the federal funding they were to receive under the negotiated child care agreement to improve the pay of child care workers in that province.

Fighting the Blues

As the social conservative agenda comes into the open, we know what we have to fear and how much we stand to lose. Since the election of the Conservative minority government, we have seen groups like REAL Women move from the shadows into a consultative role with the Prime Ministers Office. We have seen the establishment of "*new*" right-wing think tanks and institutes determined to influence Canadian public policy. We have seen the anti-choice movement revive and activate. We have seen the National Citizens Coalition launch a major attack against

the Steelworkers union in Sudbury, who organized bank workers there—the National Citizens Coalition which was led by Stephen Harper a few short years ago.

We have a Conservative federal government pouring millions of dollars into the military and into prisons, while at the same time dismantling gun control. We have a Conservative Prime Minister who has pledged to re-open the marriage debate to roll back the clock on equality for lesbian and gay Canadians. We have seen the cancellation of the federal-provincial child care deals. All this is while they are moving "*very slowly so as not to alarm the electorate*".

How Do We Respond?

It is useful to know that we are not alone in facing fundamentalist right-wing challenges presented by social conservatism. Unions, women's organizations, progressive church groups and other social justice groups around the world face the same struggle—and like us—they are fighting back.

For example, in 2002, the second annual World Social Forum gathered social justice unionists and activists from around the world. At the Forum, the Marcosur Feminist Articulation (AFM) launched a campaign called "*Against fundamentalisms, what's fundamental are people*". Building on testimonies presented by women facing increasing forms of discrimination in Palestine, Israel, the United States, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Nigeria and Brazil, the AFM pledged to tackle religious, political, economic, scientific, and cultural forms of fundamentalism.

Feminists involved in the campaign link together the concentration of power and wealth with the intensification of exclusion, inequality and discrimination. Their analysis includes the 'market fundamentalism' of neo-liberal globalization and the '*war fundamentalism*' of U.S. President George W. Bush and the political religious fundamentalism which

oppresses women. The AFM is pledged to creating space for dialogue and common struggle to organize against fundamentalism in all its forms.

The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), counting a membership of 5000 women, is part of the campaign. Its work is a concrete example of the connections being made by feminists between economic, social, and political issues. The group was formed in August 2003, during a spontaneous demonstration of women against the US occupation. Beginning with the problem of unemployment, OWFI set-out to help the tens of thousands of women who were unemployed due to the war and occupation. The lack of employment is coupled with women's increasing family responsibilities as growing numbers of male family members are detained and '*disappeared*' by warring and/or occupation forces. In collaboration with the Union of the Unemployed in Iraq, the OWFI has organized mass strikes to demand jobs, security and welfare for the unemployed. Together with the youth movement, OWFI and the unions are laying the foundations for workers' councils and new, independent trade unions in Iraq.

Taking on issues of religious fundamentalism and violence against women—on the rise since the occupation—OWFI has been educating at the community level to counter the practice of '*honour killing*', a tribal Islamic tradition allowing men to take the lives of wives, daughters and sisters believed to have betrayed their "*honour*". In summary, OWFI frames its work within three inter-related goals: the end of foreign occupation, the repeal of the Islamic Constitution replacing it with a secular constitution, and achieving economic and social equality among men and women.

Drawing from the linking of issues and struggles from a feminist perspective, union activists in Canada can take up strategies within the labour movement and in communities to challenge women's inequality, social conservatism and the religious right.

In our communities, we can work to counter the growing presence of social conservative religious groups by creating alliances with progressive community activists. The CLC's Better Choice campaign works to accomplish a greater influence for the ideas put forward by unions and community groups in various decision-making spheres at the local level including school boards and municipal governments. The Better Choice campaign is always looking for activists from among women and other equality-seeking groups to join the campaign. Beyond elections, groups can work together to ensure that equality rights and positive social changes are protected and advanced.

When the Gideon Society approached the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board for permission to distribute bibles, for example, the School Board's Education Committee turned to the Community Council on Ethno-cultural Equity for advice. Given its expertise in the areas of equality, anti-racism and diversity, the Council recommended that in order to promote equality in the classroom, not only bibles, but materials of all faith groups should be prohibited from being distributed within public schools. Union activists have similar knowledge and expertise, and combined with that of community activists, this expertise could revitalize awareness and discussion of progressive Canadian values—women's rights, anti-racism, worker's rights, access to services, solidarity—among youth and in the community as whole.

In the labour movement, women must continue to organize and participate at all levels.

We need to maintain and strengthen our alliances with women's groups nationally and at the local level, defend them against social conservative attacks and work together to build a strong opposition to right-wing anti-equality policies.

We need to increase our efforts to organize more women and members of disadvantaged groups into unions. Union drives among women workers tend to be the most successful and could be even better if unions had more women organizers and were more sensitive to the conditions women face in the workplace and the reality of women's lives at home. Our progressive policies on maternity and parental leave, child care, equal pay, choice and equality of access to jobs and training are all positive attributes of our movement. They should be highlighted to attract more sisters to our ranks.

We need to build our women's and equality committees and integrate the feminist perspective into all our work. We need to support women leadership in all areas in the movement and encourage women's political involvement in the life of our communities.

Allying with women's and other social justice groups, we need to push the agenda forward and make sure that Canadians understand the "*hidden agenda*". Canadians, time and again, have indicated that they share many of the values we as trade unionists hold dear—acceptance, opposition to discrimination, love of equality and fairness and a commitment to **collective responsibility**—for health care, for child care, for the elderly. We need to build on this consensus and make sure the true colours of the Conservative are exposed.

Now is not the time to simply defend our gains—although this we must do. We need to push forward as well—for a national child care system, equal pay for work of equal value for all equality groups in the workforce, improved unemployment programs, family-friendly workplaces and for equal access to training and jobs.

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