

Working mothers win new rights

NUMSA's ADRIENNE BIRD describes recent advances in maternity rights for working women.

Parental rights have replaced maternity rights in many negotiating forums these days. CCAWUSA at EMI have already won the principle of parental rights and are negotiating major advances in this area. While these represent the "advanced guard", there are a number of important changes being pioneered in other forums. The one that affects the largest number of women is the recent changes to the Unemployment Insurance Act. But also significant are the victories in the metal and motor industries - which extend maternity rights to women across two large sectors of the economy.

UIF changes in maternity pay

On the 1st January 1988 changes to the UIF were quietly slipped onto the statute books. The changes represent a major advance for

women workers and are no doubt a result of the growing pressure by trade unions on employers for six months paid maternity leave for all women workers.

For many years there has been a demand from women workers that the UIF Act should be changed in two fundamental ways:

- 1. that the actual amount paid to women on maternity leave should be increased from 45% to full pay*
- 2. that the period of payment for maternity leave should be a flexible six months. The 1966 UIF Act stipulated that women could only get their UIF maternity pay 4 months before and 2 months after the birth of their babies. Since most women go on confinement only 1 month before the birth, they lost out on the first 3 month's UIF pay.*

Even Wiehann acknowledged

MATERNITY RIGHTS FOR WORKING WOMEN

We demand the right to:

- work when we are pregnant
- work in safe conditions
- time off to attend ante-natal clinics
- look after our babies for at least 6 months
- get paid while we are away
- come back to our jobs without loss of benefits
- paternity leave for working men (when their babies are born)

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the legitimacy of these demands in his 1981 report. He proposed that:

1. *the amount paid be increased to 60% of normal wages, and*
2. *that the period of payment be a flexible 6 months from the time that a woman leaves work to have her baby.*

However, at that time the government held that the situation should continue unchanged as they had not received reports of "unnecessary hardship" resulting from the system as it stood.

Now, in 1988, the government seems to have been pressurised on the second demand. Unions have been demanding that employers pay the difference between what women

can get from UIF and their full pay. Because money from UIF dried up two months after the birth the effect of this demand was that many employers were being asked to pay the full wages of women for an additional three months after the birth. Hence, no doubt, the pressure from employers for the change.

The new changes mean that now women can get money from UIF for 6 months from the date that they leave the job, provided they apply before the birth or within a year of having the baby.

The conditions a women has to meet in order to qualify for benefits remain unchanged:

** she must be receiving no more than one third of her normal wages from*

her employer

** she will only receive one week's benefit for every 6 weeks she has contributed to UIF - so she has to have paid into UIF for 3 years to qualify for the full 6 months pay*

** she must have contributed to UIF for at least 13 weeks to get any benefit at all.*

There has been no change to the amount that a women can get - it is still calculated at 45% of her normal wages. This is still a battle to be fought and won.

1988 NUMSA negotiations

This year has seen major advances for workers covered by the Motor Industrial Council. This represents one of the immediate benefits of the NUMSA merger.

Firstly, motor employers have agreed to include into the Motor Agreement the identical clause on maternity leave that was last year won for the Metal Industry. This provides for a 6 months guarantee of re-employment for women who have worked for an employer for 2 years.

Secondly, they have agreed that women can receive some pay from the Motor Industry Sick and Accident Fund during maternity. The amount is unacceptably small - one third of normal pay for one month. But for an industry which is notoriously conservative and which has hitherto refused even job guaran-

tees for women, this is an important breakthrough. It is NUMSA's intention to demand an extension to both the amount and the period of payment in the next round of negotiations. (It needs to be highlighted here that the Motor Industry Sick and Accident Fund is non-contributory, whereas the Metal Industry Sick Pay Fund, which pays 50% of the minimum rate for the grade for 6 months to women on maternity, is half-worker/half-employer financed.) NUMSA also plans to challenge all qualifying periods.

In the Metal Industry the failure of SEIFSA to improve maternity provisions has contributed to a dispute being declared by IMF unions, including NUMSA.

Combining these two changes

Women in the metal industry who have met the minimum contribution periods will now get 95% of their wages (Sick Pay Fund 50% UIF) for 6 months. Women in the motor industry who have qualified will get 78% of their wages (33% - Sick and Accident Fund, 45% UIF) for one month and for the remaining five months they will get 45% from UIF. Both groups of women have their jobs (and wage levels) guaranteed for up to six months after they leave work to have their babies.

Neither industry has yet agreed to paternity leave, although this has

been a demand of the union for two years.

However, if one looks back to 1983 when CCAWUSA won the first maternity agreement with the OK Bazaars, in a climate where no-one else had any such agreement,

we can see how far we have come. We still have a long way to go to get all women the rights that some have managed to win, and for all parents to get full parental rights - but some significant victories have been won.
