

Women Workers in Britain

FIGHTING FOR A WOMEN'S WORLD TOO

Women's voices are heard

In Britain many more women workers were joining trade unions in the 1970's. There had never been so many women in unions before. But very few women were active in the unions. Very few women went to union meetings. Very few women were chosen by the workers to take up their problems and to speak for them in the factories. The shopstewards chosen to do this were mostly men. And the leaders of the trade unions - like the branch secretaries and presidents - were also mostly men.

Women in the unions saw that this was not good. The men who were the unions leaders did not always take women's problems seriously. The men were sometimes not even aware of what women workers were going through. The women union members saw that their problems as women workers would be taken up properly only when women were involved as shopstewards and leaders in their unions. Women began to organise to make their voices heard.

Finding out about women

The women got the unions to take women's issues seriously. They got the unions to look at the jobs women were doing. At how many women were shopstewards. And at what women members felt their problems



were. And they looked at whether the constitutions of unions made it more difficult for women to take positions in trade unions.

Organising women's meetings

The women decided to meet in women's forums. These were meetings for women workers only. The women felt more confident to talk at these meetings. As one woman said, "Often men in charge don't listen to what women have got to say. They don't think the women have got anything worth talking about, and that attitude keeps a lot of good women down."

The women now saw the union as their organisation. They advised the union on women's problems and made sure these were being taken up. Women who were in these forums say that it made them realise they were not alone in the union. And they felt brave enough to take part in other union meetings.

A place for women in unions.

The women fought for a place on union executive committees. The members of the executive committees are the secretary, president, treasurer, and representatives from factories. Their job is to carry out the wishes of the workers and to run the union. It was important that women were in these

committees. But they also saw that it would take a long time before women would get elected on these committees. This was because women had never done these jobs before. So some unions gave a special number of seats to women on the union executive. As one woman said, "We need to be able to voice our demands. Until we get education and experience, we need to have seats set aside for women like this."

Changing meeting times and organising child care

The main reason why women were not taking part in trade union work was women's work in the home. One woman said, "I have two jobs already. I'm a worker and a mother. Now you are saying that I should do three jobs and be a shopsteward as well".

So unions tried to have work time meetings instead of evening meetings. When meetings were held after work they tried to organise child care while meetings were going on. Or they tried to give women baby sitting allowances. Also transport was organised to and from meetings. Men were encouraged to share work in the home so that women could be more active in the unions. And some unions changed the meeting style so that there was free discussion in place of formal meetings.

Changing union education.

Most women felt that trade union education was not looking at women's problems. Very few women went to union courses. Those who went felt very shy to speak. Some unions began to change their education. They set up discussion groups for women in the factories. Other unions made sure that women's problems were raised in all union education courses. Women say that these things have helped them. As one woman said, "I'm not frightened anymore to bring forward points in meetings or courses. I have gained confidence I never had before."

Making women organisers.

Women in the unions saw that for women to have strong organisation it was important to have women organisers. And they saw that it was important to have some women organisers whose main job would be to organise on women's problems in the unions. Some unions have done this. Women say this has made a difference. It is easier for women to talk to and share problems with women organisers. And it has helped having organisers whose main job is to focus on the needs of women.

Changing union pamphlets

Women saw that they were not always shown in a good way in union pamphlets



THE WOMEN MEET



LATER BACK IN THE OFFICE



A NEW ERA DAWNS

This is part of a pamphlet about 'George the groper', and how the women at work deal with him.

NALGO is a union in Britain.

NALGO
fights
for women's
rights

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS
A TRADE UNION ISSUE. IF YOU
ARE PESTERED AT WORK,
CONTACT:**

and newspapers. Sometimes women were shown as sexy pinups. Women were not shown as people fighting their own struggles. Women have been able to change this in some unions.

Let us make our voices heard

Women workers in Britain took up the fight to get more women involved in trade unions. They were able to change some things to suit women better. And they were able to get more women to be actively involved in trade unions. Their battle is not over. They have to keep on fighting to keep what they have won. And there are new battles every day to make sure that women's voices do get heard. But what the women in Britain are doing is a lesson for women everywhere.

We can learn from the struggles of women in Britain. We can make sure that women's voices are heard in our unions, in our townships and in our country.

This article was written for SPEAK by LACOM, Johannesburg, from a LACOM booklet "The Women's Struggle for Participation in trade unions in Britain". You can order the booklet from LACOM, SACHED TRUST, Union Centre, 31 Pritchard Street, Johannesburg.



Drawing by Gili Bond. Jajta coras, Harare, Zimbabwe

A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE STRUGGLE

WE ARE BREAKING THE SILENCE

Going around with SPEAK number 19 was much more interesting than usual. Just about everyone we met had something to say about the article on women beating. Some only saw the writing on the cover which said -"BREAKING THE SILENCE - Women Say Our Men Must Stop Beating Us". And this was enough to get them talking! We were pleased. Because we want people to discuss these things. We really want to break the silence.

Some liked the article very much. They said, "It is very clearly written". "It tells exactly what women go through". "It is very strong and has ideas of what women can do". "It's a wonderful article".

But there were those who could not believe we were writing about such things. And these were mostly men. One man asked, "What are you saying? I have seen so many women beating men and you say nothing about that".

Another man said, "These things should be discussed in the bedroom."

Another said, "I don't believe it but you are asking women to form vigilante groups."

Talking about women beating
We decided to find out what others thought about men beating their wives and girlfriends. Some students helped us. They took copies of SPEAK 19 to some men and women. They asked them to read the article.