

FIRST NATIONS WOMEN RISING • A LEGACY OF LOVE • WHY WE NEED GUN CONTROL

OUR TIMES

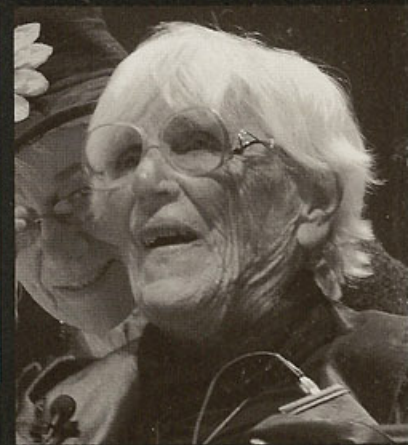
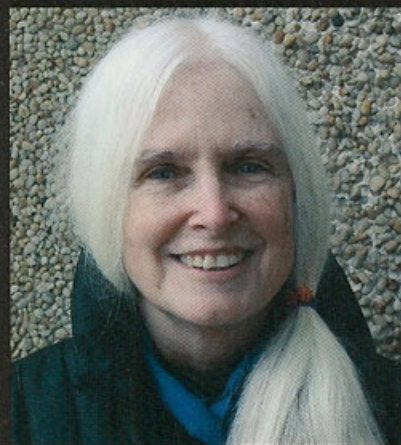
CANADA'S INDEPENDENT LABOUR MAGAZINE

ANNUAL WOMEN'S ISSUE • ANNUAL WOMEN'S ISSUE

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"I grew up experiencing foster care and residential schools. I also experienced the trauma of rape. The sexual abuse started when I was five. I was told I was an Indian and that somehow this was okay. I moved from home to home to home and never had medical attention or therapy. I am left-handed and this wasn't accepted in school — and I was Aboriginal to boot."

SANDRA LOCKHART,
North West Territories Public Service Alliance
of Canada Aboriginal Peoples Committee, Yellowknife

FIRST NATIONS WOMEN RISING

Aboriginal Women and Union Solidarity

By Janet Nicol

"THE ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S COMMUNITY may not have resources of other communities but they have something to say," says Holly Page, equity and human rights officer for the British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU). "It has been very difficult for these women to get their messages out." Page says many Aboriginal people don't see unions as their allies either. "There are myths and misconceptions about unions and debates within some communities about whether unions are beneficial. Unions need to do some relationship building."

Page should know. She is both Aboriginal and on staff with a union representing 65,000 members across B.C. with access to resources her Aboriginal sisters need. "Our union will print leaflets, buy food from Costco for events, and get the message out to our members," Page says. And what are the messages? A top concern is the continued violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, along the "Highway of Tears" in northern B.C., and in communities across Canada.

Aboriginal women have organized several "Walk 4 Justice" events and the February 14 Women's Memorial March. "It's been grassroots, and our union can help," says Page.

Walk 4 Justice participants have travelled from northern B.C. to Vancouver, and from the West Coast to Ottawa twice. They are demanding a govern-

ment inquiry into the more than 580 Aboriginal women and girls who have gone missing or been murdered across the nation. In fact, Aboriginal women are five times more likely to be murdered than other women in Canada.

"We supported the walkers," Page says. "People should know about what they are doing. The BCGEU has provided resources like t-shirts, flyers and other in-kind needs. The union logo on Walk 4 Justice supplies makes the solidarity connection clear. We also arranged to have members greet the



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRIS ANDERSON

Holly Page



PHOTOGRAPH: DOREEN MEYER/CUPE

Aboriginal people have organized over the years to demand justice for murdered or missing Aboriginal women in Canada. This picture was taken during the Walk 4 Justice gathering on Parliament Hill in 2008.

walkers on various points along the route."

"Unions aren't just about contracts," Page says. "They are a jump-start for social justice. Union members are community members, and they care about their community."

Page also uses social networking tools, a way for the union to share information with union members and listen to what they have to say, too. "There is a leader inside every Aboriginal woman," Page believes, "no matter how beaten down. Unions need to do outreach so these women can carry on."

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"I was into drinking and drugs — the whole scene. I came out of it at 30. It took three years to recover, to be able to sit still. It takes time to recover. I moved to the North (from Saskatchewan) and met an Aboriginal leader who became my husband. He decolonized me. He took me to the land to teach me. It was an experience I can't put into words."

SANDRA LOCKHART

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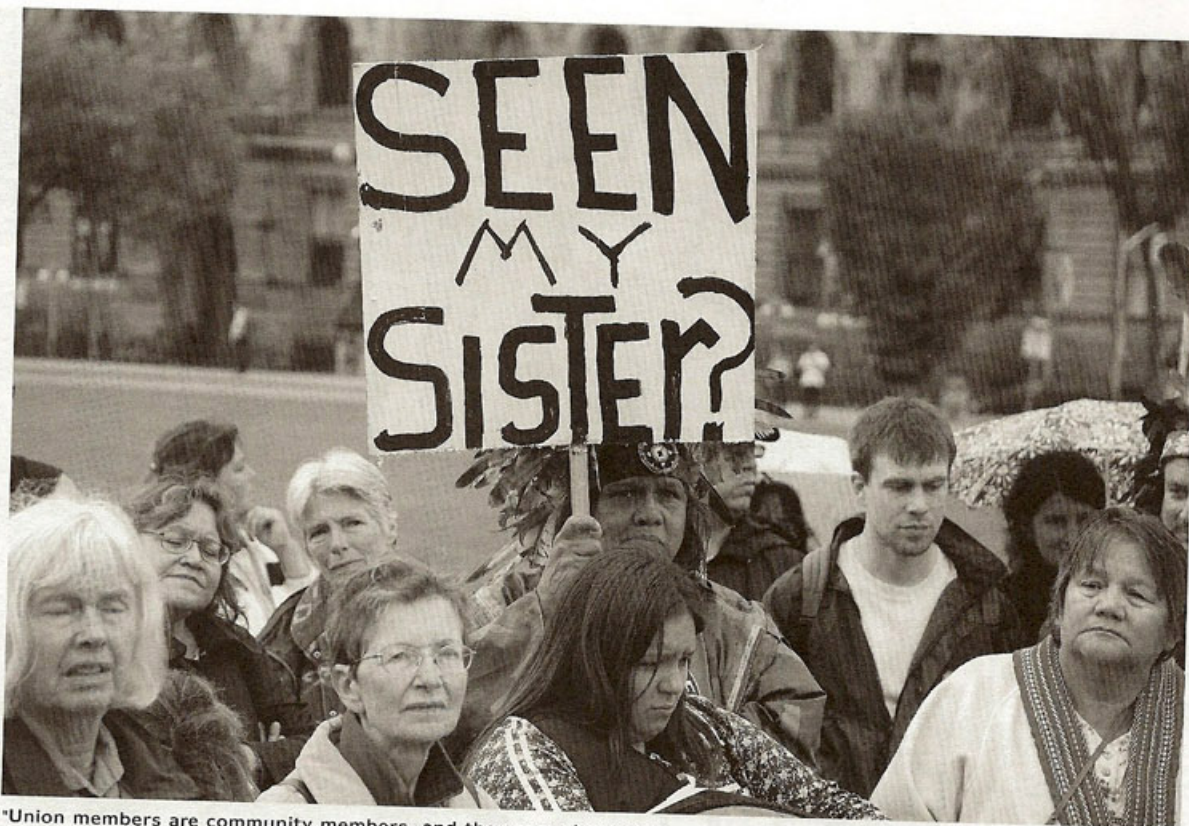
"We can come together, regardless of background," says Lorene Oikawa, a Japanese-Canadian and BCGEU member. Oikawa has been with the union for 25 years and is now in her second term as vice-president.

Oikawa recalls her work on a committee to commemorate the historic Oppenheimer Park in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. "There are connections with the Japanese-Canadian, First Nations, and even the labour community," Oikawa says about the historic park. "Freedom of speech



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY BCGEU

Lorene Oikawa



PHOTOGRAPH: DOREEN MEYER/UCPE

"Union members are community members, and they care about their community," says Holly Page, equity and human rights officer for the BCGEU. Violence against Aboriginal women in Canada is a growing concern.

was fought for by union members."

Cherry trees (Sakura) planted by first-generation Japanese-Canadians were at risk of being cut down by city officials. Oikawa and others protested and now the trees remain, unlike the Japanese-Canadians who were removed from the neighbourhood and sent to internment camps during the Second World War.

"It was decided to move one of the cherry trees to another area of the park," Oikawa says. "A First Nations drumming group volunteered to sing a song to the spirit of the tree." Japanese and First Nations cultures identified with the uprooting of their cultures in this symbolic gesture, Oikawa says.

Residential schooling resulted in a painful uprooting of First Nations culture and identity, too, and Oikawa says the BCGEU supports the ongoing reconciliation work to bring healing to the community. For over a century, the Canadian government and church groups operated schools for Aboriginal children and teens across Canada as a means to assimilate them into the dominant culture. The forced dislocation from family and the erasure of cultural identity, along with abuses committed by the school staff, have had a shattering impact. In 2008 the federal government made a formal apology to all First Nations people and established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

"Survivors are telling their truths," Oikawa says. "At a public education initiative last year, representatives from the churches were there, too. The first residential school was in Mission, B.C. in 1863 and the last school in B.C. closed in 1986." Oikawa says there are

an estimated 14,000 survivors of the residential school system in B.C. alone. "We can educate our members about these facts and support the reconciliation work."

Poverty is another hardship for Aboriginal women, pushing them into high-risk situations, including homelessness and the sex trade industry. "Women of colour and Aboriginal women are not getting full pay," Oikawa adds. "Aboriginal women face gender and racial discrimination. It's a double battle." Statistics confirm this, as the average annual income for an Aboriginal woman is \$13,300,

Aboriginal women face a double battle of gender and racial discrimination

compared to \$18,200 for Aboriginal men and \$19,350 for non-Aboriginal women.

"We support First Nations initiatives within our union and we encourage participation," Oikawa says. "The union provides a safe, welcoming place to express concerns. It's about building trust, which is a process. We don't assume we know the answers and there is still more to do. The union is strengthened when all members are stronger."

"We are all sisters and an attack against one woman is an attack against us all," Oikawa believes. "We think we don't have power but when we get together, we do."