

Sisters

ARE DOIN' IT FOR THEMSELVES

A Report from the OFL Women's Summit

By Ashmeela Ahmad



FROM DECEMBER 10 TO 12, 2012, THE Ontario Federation of Labour's Women's Leadership Summit was held at the Kempenfelt Conference Centre in Barrie, Ontario. Union sisters came from all walks of life, and included those who work in government, manufacturing, administration, the service industry, health care and education. They reflected different equity groups, rich in both diversity and ethnicity, and in age ranges and life experiences. Some were experienced union women, and others, like me, were new to the movement.

It was empowering and enlightening to meet so many eager women activists. Not only was it a safe space in which to express ourselves, but we had carte blanche to discuss women's issues, without censure or fear of paternalism.

Discussions focussed on key questions affecting women activists in leadership union positions, and the challenges they experience in the struggle for equality, against the current economic, political and social backdrop. Some of the questions were:

- Do women's structures (e.g. committees) still work?
- How do we support women leaders?
- Is there a war on women in Harper's Canada?
- What can we do to encourage women's committees to become organizing centres for equality work in our unions?

Linda Briskin, from the York University Faculty Association (YUFA), and Margaret McPhail, retiree



PHOTOGRAPHS: NANCY HUTCHISON

from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), presented the findings of the study "Leadership, Feminism & Equality in Unions in Canada." (See page 30.) Ontario Health Coalition director Natalie Mehra presented findings from "Falling Behind: A Report of the Ontario Common Front 2012." Katie Arnup, from the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, spoke about "We Are Ontario" (www.weareontario.ca), a labour- and community-based campaign launched by the Ontario Common Front, a coalition of over 90 community groups and unions in Ontario. Deena Ladd, coordinator of the Workers' Action Centre (www.workersactioncentre.org) shared her thoughts about working together with unorganized, vulner-



PHOTOGRAPH: PAT STRIEWE

One hundred and twenty women activists participated in the OFL's Women's Summit in December 2012.

PAGE 26 (Clockwise from Top Left): **TOP:** Carm Lenartowich (Canadian Auto Workers Local 199); Jenny Ahn (CAW), Prabha Khosla (Toronto City Women's Alliance), Carolyn Egan (Steelworkers Toronto Area Council), Maureen King (Toronto & York Region Labour Council). **BOTTOM:** Catherine Fife (NDP MPP Kitchener-Waterloo), Deena Ladd (Workers' Action Centre), Sue Genge (retired Canadian Labour Congress representative), Margaret McPhail (retired from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation).

able workers to help them improve their conditions. There was also a presentation about the campaign called "Step it Up: End Violence Against Women" (www.stepitupontario.ca).

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The harsh economic climate of austerity budgets and cutbacks have had the biggest impact on women, who make up the majority of public-sector and part-time workers. Federal and provincial governments have slapped down equality rights for women through such actions as cancelling federal child care programs, closing child care centres in Ontario, eliminating pay equity for federal workers, attempting to reignite a debate around abortion rights, and eradicating the long-gun registry. They have also cut back on or cancelled funding and resources that would normally have gone to women's and social justice groups. Equality is no longer seen as essential.

Within this sombre social and economic environment in Canada, participants agreed that it is crucial that women of equality-seeking groups be in leadership positions in our union movement, and,



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Karen Urchak, from the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), facilitated a learning circle.

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Left to Right: Catherine Fife (NDP MPP Kitchener-Waterloo), Andrea Horwath (leader, Ontario NDP), Nancy Hutchison (OFL secretary-treasurer, and photographer extraordinaire), Monique Taylor (NDP MPP Hamilton Mountain), Carrol Anne Sceviour (OFL human rights director, and director of women's issues).



Left to Right: Denise Brown (CAW), Shirley Walker (Ontario NDP Women's Committee president).

once there, that they be supported in those positions. Our leaders should reflect and represent the members we serve. In Ontario, over 50 per cent of union density is comprised of women, and of people of colour. Moreover, women want to join

unions, and diversity in leadership can appeal to workers not yet in a union.

Perhaps now is the time to change the union brand and leadership from the traditional Eurocentric model to one based on the inclusion of, and leadership by, women, and women of colour. And perhaps it's time for women's committees to shift away from the bake sales and fundraisers that we are traditionally assigned to, and do more work on political union campaigns such as pay equity, child care, and against violence against women — because women's issues are the union issues of today.

Ashmeela Ahmad is an occupational therapist working full time as a case manager for the Toronto Central Community Care Access Centre, in home care. She is president of COPE Local 550 (Canadian Office & Professional Employees Union), which represents health care professionals and support staff. She was recently elected president of COPE Ontario.

The title "Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves" is the name of a 1985 hit duet recorded by Aretha Franklin and Annie Lennox.

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