

# TRAILBLAZERS

UFCW CANADA

WOMEN:

A HERSTORY

OF COURAGE



# SISTERS

## *UFCW Canada Women: An Integral Part of Our Union's Past, Present, and Future*

**T**his booklet – something that celebrates the accomplishments of UFCW Canada women – is long overdue. As the title of this publication suggests, UFCW Canada women are, and have been, a driving force in the Canadian labour movement. They have fought for, and pioneered, many of the things that working people currently enjoy.

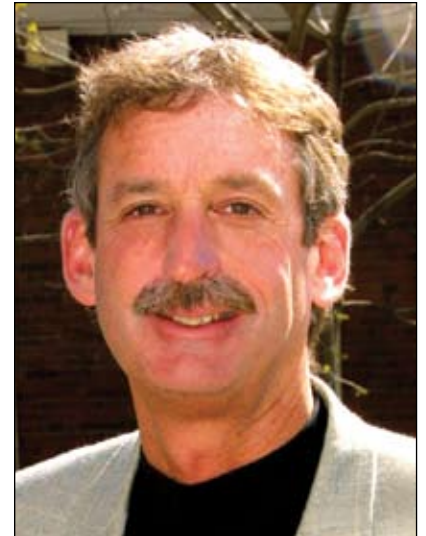
There is no question that most of our union's triumphs – such as our remarkable growth and stellar collective agreements – would not have been possible without the solid contributions of UFCW Canada women. Because so many of our staff representatives, activists, and leaders are women, UFCW Canada is deeply reliant upon them and simply could not function without their dedication and selflessness.

We can all be thankful for the foresight of past UFCW Canada leaders, who saw the value of encouraging our union sisters to the front lines. While it is clear from these pages that women have long had active roles in our union, rank-and-file members were encouraged in recent years to take on a greater role in the union. The ongoing support by our union for women's concerns has underlined the importance of women's contributions, and that fundamental will remain a major part of our philosophy in the years to come.

UFCW Canada's identity – what our union believes in, what it stands for, and what it aspires to be – has largely been shaped by women. As the champions of many progressive causes, UFCW Canada women have helped our union earn a reputation that is synonymous with workers' rights, the pursuit of social justice, and a firm commitment to fostering safe working environments.

UFCW Canada is very optimistic about the future. Time and time again, our union has demonstrated to the world that certain industries – and particular companies – are not beyond the scope of organized labour. Extracting a fair deal from corporations like Wal-Mart has never been easy, but we will not be intimidated, and we will not rest until the benefits of unionization are extended to our unorganized brothers and sisters. Because of UFCW Canada women, I am certain they will be.

In solidarity,  
Wayne Hanley  
National Director, UFCW Canada



**UFCW CANADA WOMEN: TRAILBLAZERS & SISTERS**  
is a publication of UFCW Canada (the United Food and Commercial Workers union in Canada). First edition. Produced by the UFCW Canada National Communications Department for the Women's Advisory Committee of the UFCW Canada National Council. ©2006 UFCW Canada. Images from national union archives and those supplied by UFCW Canada local unions used by permission.

ISBN 0-9739582-5-1

ua0604b.i.2m

## *In the Beginning*

With nearly a quarter of a million members, UFCW Canada – the United Food and Commercial Workers union in Canada – is one of our country’s largest unions. UFCW Canada represents working men and women, of all ages and ethnicities, in several major sectors of the economy.

While our members do just about every job imaginable, most of them work in grocery stores, warehouses, meat-packing plants, the fishing industry, retail, food processing, hotels, beer stores, garment factories, and health care facilities.

UFCW Canada has a long and complex history that stretches back to the late 1800s. Prior to the Second World War, our union – like the vast majority of other organizations – was dominated by men. As a result, the needs of female workers were secondary, if they were considered at all.

World War II profoundly affected the Canadian workplace. Before the war, gender roles were clearly defined and followed. Women, for the most part, worked in the home either as caregivers or domestic servants, and men worked in office buildings or they laboured in places like packinghouses.

As legions of male workers were ferried off to fight in the war, a massive demand for labour rapidly developed. As a result, women found themselves in occupations such as office sec-

retaries, mechanics, and store clerks that had traditionally been the reserve of men. While the Second World War did not establish equality in the workplace, it did introduce droves of Canadian women to the outside world of work – where they remained.

## *Huguette Plamondon: An Enduring Legacy*

**Huguette Plamondon**, a union office secretary from Montréal, was the embodiment of Canada’s new generation of working women. Shortly after entering the workforce in 1945, Sister Plamondon found herself embroiled in a massive strike that involved the entire meat-packing industry. Motivated by a strong belief in social justice, Sister Plamondon became an ardent supporter of the strike. She led pickets and became a source of inspiration and encouragement for her fellow union members. She was 21 years old.

Because Sister Plamondon possessed a rare combination of intelligence, passion, eloquence, and flam-



Mudry Fur Dressers, Montréal, 1950s

Huguette Plamondon, 1990s





The late Marie-Josée Lemieux, first woman president of UFCW Canada Local 503, Québec

Teresa Magee, executive vice-president of North America's largest local union, Ontario Local 175



boyance (e.g., she wore fedoras and smoked large cigars), she rapidly rose through the labour movement's ranks – and she made history every step of the way.

Sister Plamondon was elected president of the Montréal Labour Council in 1955, and by doing so became the first Canadian woman to lead a major labour organization.

A year later, Sister Plamondon became the first woman in Canada to achieve a national union executive position by becoming a vice-president of the newly-formed Canadian Labour Congress (CLC).

Sister Plamondon also served UFCW Canada as an international vice-president and as the longtime president of Local 744P.

When asked to explain the secret of her success, Sister Plamondon responded, "To be successful in the labour movement, you've got to love it, thoroughly believe in it, and put your whole heart into it. It's not just a job – it's a vocation."

Sister Plamondon was a trailblazer. Quite simply, before Huguette, working women did not run for – let alone win – high office. Not only did she win, but she also proved the naysayers wrong. Sister Plamondon

dedicated 47 years of her life to showing working women that they possess the ability to be effective labour leaders.

Huguette Plamondon's legacy is colossal: she challenged the union's male leadership to consider the enormous potential of female members and, more importantly, she challenged UFCW Canada women to step forward and join her in the quest for a more equitable future.

They did, and they have never looked back.

## Leading the Movement

Since Huguette Plamondon blazed the trail, UFCW Canada women have become fixtures in the executive ranks of various labour organizations.

Over the years, UFCW Canada women have led our union in a myriad of ways. At the national level, they have acted as vice-presidents, organizers, negotiators, staff representatives, communicators, and senior administrators. In local unions, UFCW Canada women have served the membership as presidents, secretary-treasurers, regional directors, and executive vice-presidents. And at the shop-floor level, numerous women have represented their brothers and sisters as executive officers, stewards, and

health-and-safety activists.

In 1966, **Iona Samis**, a packinghouse worker since 1947, was elected the first female vice-president of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL). Since 1966, UFCW Canada women have often sat as OFL executives, and they have built upon Sister Samis's legacy by becoming a perennial force in the Ontario labour movement.

Some 23 years after Sister Samis made history, **Susan Hart-Kulbaba** – a Safeway supermarket cashier from UFCW Canada Local 832 – became the first woman to serve as president of the Manitoba Federation of Labour (MFL). For her outstanding contributions to the provincial labour movement, Sister Hart-Kulbaba was declared Manitoba's Woman of the Year in 1989.

## A Tradition of Political Activism

**Louissette Hinton**, a UFCW Canada staff representative and long-time advocate for women's rights, has spent the last three decades trying to build the relationship between feminism, the labour movement, and political action.

Sister Hinton has demonstrated that working women can – and should – become political leaders. Prior to becoming the first executive secretary of the union's Québec provincial coun-

cil, a vice-president of the CLC, president of the Québec New Democratic Party (NDP), and a federal candidate for the Montréal-area riding of Blainville--Deux-Montagnes in 1988, Sister Hinton – a single mother of five children – worked as a part-time cashier at a Steinberg store, later Miracle Mart (UFCW Canada Local 503).

Knowing first-hand that working women have a lot to offer the political process, Sister Hinton co-founded *Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie*, an organization that not only encourages working women to run for public office, but also instructs them on how to be successful in political life and how to lobby for policies – such as a national daycare program – that enhance the standard of living for ordinary Canadians.

Sister Hinton's political activism transcends national boundaries. As someone who believes in the moral and economic necessity of fighting for the rights of workers around the world, Sister Hinton has actively participated in international demonstrations, delegations, and conferences in numerous countries including the United States, Romania, France, South Africa, China, Australia, and Mexico.

Many UFCW Canada women have



Iona Samis with UPWA Canada leader Fred Dowling and U.S. farmworker icon Cesar Chavez, 1970s

Louissette Hinton at Ottawa media scrum, 1990s





Québec members take their message to the streets

Alberta striker makes her case to the media



also dedicated much effort to the pursuit of social democracy. A few examples:

- **Bev Desjarlais** was the first UFCW Canada member elected as a Member of Parliament, representing the northern Manitoba riding of Churchill from 1997 to 2006, and held several key portfolios in the NDP's shadow cabinet.

- **Deb Higgins**, a Safeway supermarket cashier and member of UFCW Canada Local 1400, was elected to the Saskatchewan legislature as the member of provincial parliament (MPP) for Moose Jaw Wakamow in 1997. Until

recently, Sister Higgins served the province as minister of labour and minister responsible for the status of women. On February 3, 2006, Lorne Calvert, the NDP premier of Saskatchewan, named Sister Higgins to several key portfolios: minister of learning, minister responsible for literacy, minister responsible for liquor and gaming authority, and minister responsible for Saskatchewan telecommunications.

- In the same 1997 Saskatchewan election, **Carolyn Jones**, another member of UFCW Canada Local 1400, was elected as MPP for the riding of Saskatoon Meewasin.

As every smart politician knows, elections are won by volunteers, and UFCW Canada women have been donating their time and energy to the NDP since it was created in 1961. For example, Sister Samis, an inexhaustible political activist, served as the NDP's first budget chief and juggled bank accounts in order to keep the young party alive.

In another example, after serving as a Local 1977 union steward and member of the political action committee for several years, **Pat Peters**, a cashier at Zehrs Supermarket in Alliston, Ont. was hired by Paul Wessinger, then-MPP for Simcoe Centre, to work as his legislative assistant.

The indefatigable **Darlene Dziewit** was not only a wife, mother, labour activist, and full-time UFCW Canada Local 832 staff representative, but she was also a dynamic member of the NDP. In addition to serving the party as a vice-president, Sister Dziewit oversaw many campaigns as the NDP's director of organizing, and, as a dedicated member of the Federal Candidate Search Committee, she encouraged many of her union sisters to run for elected office.

In 2004, Sister Dziewit became the second UFCW Canada woman to lead Manitoba's labour federation. As president of the MFL, Sister Dziewit has continued to do what she has always done: be a strong voice, a relentless activist, and an inspiration for working women everywhere.

## Making a Din for Over 60 Years

UFCW Canada women have never been afraid of stepping outside. In fact, they have long viewed the street as one of the best places to fight for justice.

During a major strike in 1945, UFCW Canada women caught the attention of a Toronto newspaper, "... pickets, including 120 girls, strolled about the St. Clair Ave. plant. Mounted police insisted in a good natured way that they 'keep moving,' but there was no demand that picketers march single file. Girls strolled arm-in-arm in the bright sunshine, some singing."

Nearly 40 years later, a next generation of female packinghouse workers helped form picket lines at the famous Gainer's strike. In fact, UFCW Canada women have played a key role in nearly every work stoppage in our union's history.

In addition to strikes, UFCW Canada women have participated in other public protests:

- In 1995, they led the women's march against poverty.
- In 1999 and 2001, UFCW Canada women trekked to Seattle, Washington, and Québec City to take part in massive anti-globalization rallies.
- And in 2000, they took part in the *World Women's March*, a worldwide demonstration – dedicated to the elimination

of child poverty and violence against women – that culminated in front of the United Nations building in New York City.

Also, UFCW Canada women have often congregated on the front lawn of Parliament and various provincial legislatures, where they have challenged the regressive policies of neo-conservative governments.

## Helping Our Union Grow

There is a lot more to being a labour activist than carrying a picket sign and shouting into a megaphone. In fact, some forms of labour activism – like organizing – can be rather discrete.

A number of UFCW Canada women are widely regarded as outstanding organizers.

For example, after organizing the nursing home at which she worked, **Mary Duchesne** became a full-time staff member for UFCW Canada Local 175. Through introducing unionization to numerous men and women, Sister



Retail clerks on the picket line, date unknown

Sister Hinton leads Ottawa women's march, 2000





Organizing migrant workers in British Columbia

On the picket line, Brooks, Alberta, 2005



Duchesne helped to improve the standard of living for dozens of Canadian working families.

When asked why she led an organizing drive at her workplace, **Debbie Berthelot** – a worker at a Gainer’s bacon plant in North Battleford, Saskatchewan – recalled her childhood: “We lived on a farm, but mom went into town for every union meeting.”

Many UFCW Canada women refer to a strong belief in social justice as their motivation for getting involved. For instance, **Debora De Angelis**, the retail worker who organized a Suzy Shier mall outlet, decided to rally her fellow workers because she believed their rights were being ignored. Sister De Angelis went on to become a youth activist with UFCW Canada, and later a national staff representative.

While individuals play a key role, organizing is ultimately a team effort. The unionization of a workplace depends upon exploited workers deciding that it is time to demand a fair deal. For example, the recent victory at Lakeside Packers, in Brooks Alberta (UFCW Canada Local 401), was only possible because hundreds of workers – many of them women – banded together to force positive change. By coordinating their efforts, Lakeside

women not only helped make labour history but they also demonstrated to their unorganized brothers and sisters that the best asset working people have is each other.

## Empowering Workers

Our union believes that workers are entitled to certain rights, including a living wage, decent benefits, stability, dignity, and respect.

Demanding and protecting the rights of working women is not easy. In fact, it is a never-ending battle. But in spite of this reality, UFCW Canada has done a lot to expand and secure the rights of its female members.

UFCW Canada has a long history of fighting for equal treatment in the workplace.

In 1966, UFCW Canada was the first union to establish wage parity in the food industry. In other words, for four decades our union has been negotiating contracts that demand the same pay for the same job. Period.

**Pearl Sawyer** (née **Mackay**), the executive vice-president of UFCW Canada Local 1000A, is a trailblazer for several reasons. She ran for, and nearly won, political office, quickly ascended the ranks of her local, and was the first woman to serve the Prince Edward Island Federation of Labour (PEIFL) as secretary-treasurer – all before she turned 25.

Sister Sawyer broke down other barriers. She was the first person to challenge the gender segregation that had long existed at her place of work, Canada Packers. To be more precise, Sister Sawyer was the first person to insist that women should have the right to work on the kill floor – where workers made more money and had more job security – and she became one of the first women to do so. Many more followed.

In addition to demanding equality in the workplace, UFCW Canada women have steadfastly defended the right to a safe working environment. Motivated by a rising number of repetitive strain injuries, Sister Sawyer spearheaded an initiative to redesign checkout stands. As a result, the number of cashiers injured at work has decreased significantly.

**Denise Cameron**, a staff representative for UFCW Canada Local 500R, is an ardent health-and-safety activist who has done an excellent job of reminding employers that intangible workplace hazards – such as psychological harassment – are very destructive, and that workers have a right to be protected from them.

Sisters Sawyer and Cameron are part of a legion of activists who routinely stand up for co-workers. Every day, in workplaces across the country, UFCW Canada women courageously confront injustice – by setting boundaries, demanding equality, and helping others to speak up and speak out.

## Committed to Teaching and Learning

Knowledge is power. When a worker expands upon her skills, she is better equipped to compete in the labour market. When a worker knows her rights, she is more likely to demand them. And when a worker becomes politically aware, she is in a better position to influence the policies that affect her family and her day-to-day life.

UFCW Canada provides its members with a wide range of learning opportunities both in training centres operated in local unions across the country as well as online and other distance-learning opportunities.

Our training centres offer courses that build upon our members' practical skills:

- Collective bargaining
- Arbitration
- Language Training
- Career Transition Service
- Netfile Income Tax Course
- Making a Webpage
- ABCs of Computing
- Program-specific computer skills



Poultry processing at Maple Lodge Farms, Ontario

Lifelong learning builds opportunities and security





UFCW Canada women at one of many *Take Back the Night* demonstrations across the country

UFCW Canada women members in food-processing



- Safe Food Handling
- Public Speaking

UFCW Canada also offers classes that are designed to help members understand – and take advantage of – their rights:

- Facing Management
- Human Rights Legislation
- Psychological Harassment
- Discrimination
- Duty to Accommodate
- Violence in the Workplace
- Accident Investigation
- Federal and Provincial Health and Safety Legislation

Through providing social science courses, UFCW Canada strives to foster a more informed and engaged membership:

- Labour History
- Globalization
- Labour and the Arts
- Organizing for Social Change
- Taking Workplace to Politics

Some UFCW Canada locals also have agreements with post-secondary institutions that recognize our union's courses and apply them towards the completion of an accredited certificate in labour relations.

UFCW Canada members and their children can also apply for several scholarships:

- UFCW Canada locals offer their members scholarship programs that are collectively worth tens of thousands of dollars.
  - UFCW International Scholarship (a \$4,000.00 grant that is available to all members and their children).
  - The *Beggs-Dowling-Mathieu Scholarship* (a \$500.00 award that is available to all members and their children).
- Members and their families are free to apply for – and receive – all three.

## Making a Difference

Since 1987, UFCW Canada members have raised well over \$6-million for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of Canada.

These funds were raised by countless walkathons, bowlathons, barbecues, bake sales, and pool, tennis, golf, hockey, and volleyball tournaments – most of which were planned, organized, and administered by UFCW Canada women.

Not only are several research projects exclusively funded by the money that our members raise, but – as leading researchers have credited – UFCW Canada's fundraising efforts have resulted in a series of breakthroughs.

In addition to advising the union's leadership on women's issues and participating in various collective actions – like *Take Back the Night*

marches – the UFCW Canada Women’s Advisory Committee is committed to serving the community and has raised thousands of dollars for various causes over the years.

While the members of the advisory committee are zealous “leukemia fighters”, they have also raised significant sums of money for women’s shelters, needy families, and charities such as the United Way and the Breast Cancer Society of Canada.

## *Proud of the Past but Focused on the Future*

As one might expect, our organization has changed dramatically over the past century. What started out as an insular, ragtag, and in some cases anonymous collection of associations became one of North America’s largest and most respected private sector unions.

As UFCW Canada grew and evolved, the

number of female members and their role in our union grew and evolved as well. Because of activists like Huguette Plamondon, Iona Samis, Mary Duchesne, Susan Hart-Kulbaba, Louisette Hinton, Pearl Sawyer, and a good many more, social norms were challenged, barriers came crashing down, and progress was achieved. UFCW Canada was founded by men, but in many respects it was shaped by women.

While UFCW Canada women have done much to create a more equitable workplace, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. As long as millions of Canadian working women remain unorganized, sexual harassment will persist, wage parity will not be realized, and scores of working-class families will continue to live in poverty.

But UFCW Canada women are a brave and resourceful troop who will – without a doubt – blaze as many trails in this century as they did in the last one.



Leukemia research fundraising in Cobourg

Focused on the Future; Empowered for Change

