

## **International Women's Day – Bill 75 Setback**

*By Pamela Langille*

On March 8 we celebrate International Women's Day. This is a time to take stock of the trials and tribulations we have suffered in seeking equality for women throughout history and reflect on the ongoing struggles of today as we try to progress toward social justice. While there is a great deal of success to celebrate in the women's liberation movement, it is imperative that we acknowledge the setbacks at our midst. Just recently, the current government passed Bill 75 and imposed a legislated contract on public school teachers. Make no mistake, the austerity measures used in Nova Scotia by the current government and by many other governments around the country and continent, disproportionately harm women.

While seemingly insidious at first glance, the harmful effects of the ongoing attacks on teachers and the public sector are clearly also attacks on women. Teachers, along with other public sector workers, are predominantly women. In Nova Scotia, women compose 77 percent of the teachers in public schools and close to 70 percent of all public sector jobs. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) Nova Scotia Budget Watch 2015: Through a Gender Lens document stated that these public sector jobs:

- represent quality jobs, where pay is on average higher than private sector jobs, with smaller pay equity gaps;
- are unionized and provide good benefits to women including extended health and maternity benefits. In addition, more women in the public sector have pensions (two thirds, as opposed to only one third in the private sector); and,
- make valuable contributions to the common good.

The gains of the public sector and women are under attack and while these austerity measures will negatively affect everyone, they will indeed affect women disproportionately.

Unfortunately, instead of the government acting in the public interest by seeking to protect public sector employment, women's civil and political rights, and increase support for public services to provide quality services that will benefit everyone, along with those who need them most, the government acted in the contrary, and has actually exacerbated inequalities and set back the status of women in Nova Scotia. If the austerity agenda was not harmful enough, the government's approach to move forward with its agenda was laced with the vilification of teachers and actions that undermine the teaching profession.

When reflecting upon the Minister's Action Plan and how the current government first began its 'relationship' with the teaching profession in this province, I liken it to the words of Sabrina Joy Stevens, who wrote in her blog titled 'Bad' Women, Teachers, and Politics: "To recap a few years' worth of disinformation: Teachers, you may have heard, will determine and (especially) economic future of our entire nation. And because we have so many of these bad, lazy (read: unionized) teachers, our students have performed miserably compared to those in other countries, struggled with a persistent racial "achievement" gap and more, threatening the very future of

America. All this they've done while enjoying lavish pay, benefits and pensions that have bankrupted our budgets." Stevens continues, "Just as with the 'ideal' woman in a broader sense, there is much praise lavished on the 'ideal' teacher, who quietly, unobtrusively and selflessly does her work. But when teachers try to have a voice in the decisions that affect them, or advocate for better pay and working conditions, they're derided as being selfish."

When the profession is 77 percent women, there is no need to specify women teachers for the image in people's minds to be women, as the vilification portrays teachers as overpaid, incompetent, incapable of leadership, and selfish. And certainly let us not forget the drain these teachers [women] have on our economy and the tax payers of Nova Scotia as their Union advocates for fair remuneration and working conditions, which become easier to dismiss when demonized as greedy and unsustainable by the government.

The unionization of workplaces, and especially predominantly female workplaces, is a milestone in women's civil and political rights, and must not be taken for granted. The attack on unions is real, as we have experienced right here at home with the government's austerity agenda. Canada is categorized as a high-income country and in high-income countries, the majority of women are employed in the health and education sector. "[This] overrepresentation of women in health and education may be attributed to social assumptions which undervalue the skills required for such jobs. For instance, education – and in particular the teaching of younger children – is considered an extension of women's traditional, maternal role." Perhaps these assumptions are also influencing the fallible narrative of the current government that teachers [women] needed to be "put in their place" with Bill 75. After all, it was not just "teachers" who needed to be put in their place, but all of the predominately female public sector.

While the rhetoric often used to justify such austerity measures tries to mask itself as gender-neutral and stick to a message of fiscal sustainability and the need for the public sector to compensate for the province's "fiscal woes," this is not only presumptuous, but it is simply untrue. As Jordan Brennan outlines in the CCPA document, *Growth, Austerity and the Future of Nova Scotia Prosperity*, the province's public spending does not need to be 'reined in': "Nova Scotia has more fiscal room than other Atlantic provinces, and it is in the top half of the Canadian federation when it comes to its account balance." Not only are austerity measures unnecessary in our current economic state, but the evidence presented by Jordan Brennan suggests they "do more economic damage and social harm than good."

It is important we remind ourselves that the rhetoric of today has a deeply rooted past that many before us have fought against. Our current voice that challenges the government's rhetoric has been echoed throughout history. At the 1938 National Education Association Convention in the United States, it was stated that "We have to realize that it is not our educational system alone that counts, but educational systems in all the countries of the world... Good education costs money; people do not like taxes, and sometimes the political leaders see no connection between education and future prosperity." As disheartening as the sluggish progress can sometimes be, we must also not forget that we have roots just as deep and in solidarity we will persevere. The

struggle for both social justice and a quality public education is something that we must not forget is ongoing and will not progress without challenge from organized workers. Anti-union actions by governments will continue since they know, all too well, it is only those people who are organized, and fighting in solidarity, that will have the force to break the barriers before us. Just as the saying goes, ‘*together we bargain, divided we beg.*’

## Sources

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