RADICAL WOMEN
IN ACTION ---
THE CASE OF
SEATTLE CITY LIGHT
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BY HEIDI DURHAM

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By Heidi Durham

In the past year and a half, four members of Radical Women have been deeply involved in supporting and encouraging a mass employee movement at Seattle's publicly-owned electrical utility.

In April, 1974, City Light workers embarked on a mass walk-out that lasted 11 days and involved 1400 out of 1700 employees. In June of 1974, City Light became the first utility to hire 10 women into the electrical trades through a special Affirmative Action training program. The movement born of the walk-out, and strengthened by the Electrical Trades Trainee training program for women, has fought the bosses at every turn for over a year, and this remarkably sustained struggle has presented many challenges to us as socialist-feminists.

We felt a deep responsibility to be examples of principled working class militancy, to expose the class warfare that hides behind "labor-management relations," and to show that the way to win against the employer is through the class solidarity forged when privileged, white-male workers understand that they must support the demands of the lower-paid and lower-skilled workers, predominantly women and minorities, in their midst, in return for concerted action by the total workforce.

In the past several years, City Light employees, like most government workers, have been exposed to a close-up view of City government corruption and anti-labor bias.

The City Light walkout was started by unionized male electrical workers, predominantly white, in protest against two disciplinary suspensions and the militaristic "penal code" upon which the suspensions were based. Seven hundred International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) union members, needing support for their unauthorized strike, turned to the non-union City Light workers, including the low-paid, women office workers.

These women had previously experienced only sellouts from the union leadership because of the union's refusal to expand to an industrial union concept which could have included women workers. One of our members at City Light, however, recognized the potential of the situation and actively organized in both groups--the union membership and the women. She was militant and consistent in her stand on the issues and became a spokesperson for the entire body precisely because of this. She pointed out to the union men that they couldn't win without earning the women's support, and she pointed out to the women that they couldn't win support for their demands for union membership unless they were also willing to act in solidarity with the men. The women demanded protection from the union in return for their prolonged participation in the walkout, and in return the union membership pledged to defend the unorganized workers against any future reprisals.

Armed with this kind of solidarity, virtually everyone but the top level administrators and supervisors walked off the job.

At this point the walkout became much more than a protest over an individual grievance--it became a freedom struggle based on the principle of workers' intrinsic human right to be treated with dignity and respect. The power of this issue was
manifest in its capacity to cut across and dissolve longstanding divisions among the
workers. White men who had little previous experience with personal oppression on
the job now could see with a broader vision. And the women, plunged into the fore-
front of the movement, were in a new position of power to push their demands. It
was this solidarity that gave the struggle its dynamic and militancy, and which di-
rectly raised the issue of workers' power, in terms of workers' control over their
management. The strikers demanded nothing less than the ouster of the City Light
superintendent, and then, as the collusion of the mayor with superintendent became
obvious, the workers promptly decided to initiate a campaign to recall the mayor!

Mass uprisings, by their very nature, bring together opposing political and social
viewpoints. The walkout at City Light was no exception. The strongest contradiction
among the workers was between the worker-aristocracy on the one hand, and the union
rank-and-file, minorities, and low-paid women workers on the other. Because most of
the latter, especially the women, had little to lose materially, they were the most
willing to fight and stay out until the demands of the walkout were met. The union
aristocracy, highly-paid, high seniority, union officers, lost their original militancy,
however, when the bills for the houses, boats, and new cars began to stack up and
hostilely retreated into their traditional, deep-seated conservatism. These older men
sensed that the struggle had far surpassed the boundaries of their own narrow self-
interests; afraid and resentful of the women in leadership and the radical demands
of the rank-and-file, they engineered a plot to monopolize the microphones at a mass
meeting on the 11th day and called for everyone to return to work—or else, implying
that they were returning at any cost.

Faced with this impossible split in the ranks, everyone did return to work, but
we didn't go back empty-handed. An agreement was reached between the City and
City Light employees that gave us, as radicals, feminists, and militants, a forum
with which to continue the struggle. The guts of the agreement established (1) a
joint committee of employees and management representatives to write an Employ-
ee Bill of Rights and Responsibilities which would replace the fascistic disciplinary
code, (2) a Public Review Committee to conduct open hearings on City Light man-
agement, and (3) a guarantee of no reprisals.

With the end of the walkout, the most challenging period of the struggle began,
when we, as radicals, had to help keep the movement alive after the exciting upsurge
had died down. Our task became one of daily, consistent, and patient organizing on
and off the job. We encouraged the newborn militants to maintain their momentum,
to meet regularly and devise a structure for the new all-employee group, to keep
fighting back against the continual attacks of management and to keep alive the
basic ideals and program so vividly expressed in the walkout.

Two months after the walkout, in June, ten women electrical trades trainees
were hired—including me and two other Radical Women members. This program,
like other Affirmative Action programs, was significant because it grew out of the
struggles of the feminist movement and held out the promise that women could
break out of economic serfdom and take an equal place in the previous bastion of
male privilege—the skilled trades.

But management immediately began the inevitable sabotage campaign. In a
flagrant reprisal, they abruptly removed the program coordinator who was not only
our advocate but a Radical Women member who had been a recognized leader of
the walkout. They then terminated our planned pre-placement training program,
proceeded to deny us schooling on company time which is supposed to be granted to all special Affirmative Action program participants. When we protested, demanding that management fulfill its original program plans, we were all given a loyalty oath to sign which gave us the choice of resigning immediately or pledging to give up our rights to free speech and freedom of association—otherwise known as the right to organize.

Several of the ten trainees, in particular the radicals, have been subjected to continuing harassment as well as trumped-up charges based on anonymous letters that somehow, periodically, find their way to management. Most recently, management informed us that rather than hiring us into regular electrician positions, they had no intention of continuing the program, which had "served its purpose"—to them at least.

We knew that the only way to overcome this sabotage and betrayal was by resisting every attack and organizing support from every possible source. It was essential to encourage strong trainee solidarity in a unified front against management; only then could we demonstrate our unity to the union and demand fair representation by them. Nine out of ten trainees accordingly filed a class action sex discrimination claim to try to protect ourselves from being fired and to publicize and expose the underlying social issue of prejudice against us. Our claim also made clear our connection with the militant female leadership of the walkout and their principle of workers' solidarity.

While there have been many sharp disputes among the trainees over tactics and ideology, most of us have very successfully unified in the face of hostile forces. The one weakness in our solid front has been in the area of participating in union affairs and bringing pressure to bear on the union to support us. The strong differences in our politics have come to life on this issue.

Most of the other trainees are non-political and non-feminist, and two are lesbian separatists who make a political ideology out of isolation from men and from all political struggles. All these trainees either failed to see that if the union was allowed to sell us out, we would be isolated and powerless in our struggle against management, or else simply couldn't summon the energy and time for union activism, while supporting our efforts.

Towards management, however, we have all been united in our demands. This allowed us radicals to act on the trainees' behalf to force the union to fight for our demands, even though the trainees were too intimidated to do it.

Why is the union so important? It is the official organ of the workers, the only organization that labor has in its struggle against management, and our membership in the union provides us with an important vehicle for use against management, and for important association with our co-workers. We consistently advocate to the union that solidarity means not just protecting the rights of white-male members, but adhering to their own basic principles and equally protecting our rights as women workers.

We have won unprecedented support from the union as a result of our militant activism in the union and on the job. When we received the loyalty oath demand from management, the union agreed to write a protest letter to management supporting our right not to sign away our civil rights. Later, when one of us was framed-up on a phony rule violation and suspended for three days, we circulated a petition letter exposing management's denial of civil liberties and protesting the fact that attacks were being made against a woman and minority men—a clear assault on Affirmative
We obtained 150 signatures of union members on this petition, which was essentially a socialist feminist document. It was passed unanimously, as a Resolution at the next union meeting. And most recently, when management threatened to lay us off, we persuaded the union to insist that we be hired into regular positions, and to object to the (still-pending) layoffs on the principle of management's responsibility for Affirmative Action!

The union bureaucracy, of course, has hardly been quick to move on our behalf. We have forced their official support by organizing the rank-and-file to pressure them, or by simply outarguing them on issues. We proved ourselves dedicated unionists, and we never stop explaining how our struggle for women's rights is an intrinsic part of the labor struggle, not a competitor. Nor have we hesitated to use outside pressure when it was necessary; the union was not acting on the threat to our jobs until Office of Women's Rights officials attended a meeting with union officials and informed the union of its vulnerability to legal action unless they provided us with fair representation!

It was not easy, at first, to convince the Office of Women's Rights to take a forthright stand on our behalf, since the Office is a part of the Executive Department (the mayor). But some excellent investigating was carried on by the Office. The trainees' clout with the Office was considerably facilitated by the fact that Radical Women was to a large extent responsible for the creation of that Office in the first place, only a few years ago!

We have helped to keep the workers' movement alive at City Light by continuing to stand up for and organize around all workers' rights. Like the women walkout leaders before us, we provided the union with valuable exposure to serious feminism and to the leadership of women. As much as some workers hate to admit it, we have gained respect because of our tenacity and our knowledge of the issues we raised. Because of our consistent union participation and our unmistakable dedication to labor and workers' rights, some of the men have taken heart and continued their own involvement in the general employees' rights grouping.

We have successfully used our fight for union democracy, equal representation and civil rights as a means to elevate the class struggle by raising the consciousness of the workers. With every victory, every defeat, and every attempt, there was always something for us to learn from the union and always something for us to teach. The story of our involvement in Local 77 is the exciting story of a true mutual experience between us and the male workers.

--Seattle, Washington
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Dissident speaks—

By DEBBY LOWMAN

During the past six months, Clara Fraser, 51, has emerged as a leader of dissident City Light employes in disputes with management.

But to observers and participants of Seattle's radical movements, Clara Fraser has been known for years as a leader of dissidents.

Like Barbra Streisand's "Katie" in the movie, "The Way We Were," Ms. Fraser is a never-say-die radical. Only where Katie fell in love with Robert Redford, Ms. Fraser thinks he's nothing but a good-looking schmuck—a "typical frat-boy jock."

SINCE HER participation in the 1948 Boeing Co. strike shortly after she arrived in Seattle, Clara Fraser has been involved in countless causes.

Her self-described "agitator, rabble-rouser" style of speech was learned on movement soap boxes from labor strikes to civil rights. She has spoken before college classes, socialists and masses of anti-war demonstrators.

In the past few months, her speech has brought applause from City Light workers, many of whom scorned the anti-war demonstrators and look with suspicion upon any political party right or left of the basic two.

MS. FRASER is not typical of many of the employe leaders. For most, this is their first experience with a major labor dispute and few have participated in street demonstrations.

Early in the dispute, someone distributed a leaflet publicizing a speech Ms. Fraser was supposedly giving before the Freedom Socialist Party. The leaflet was a hoax, Ms. Fraser said, designed to "divide the workers."

"It made me sound like I was fresh out of Moscow," she said, and some of the employes were concerned.

"I told the employes I would talk politics if they wanted and many did come up—both radicals and conservatives.

"I think that one of the reasons for much of the tolerance is that almost every family now has a 'crazy, hippie, radical' in it somewhere. Everybody comes up to me and tells me about their militant daughter or revolutionary son. The world's changed. Political consciousness and social awareness is tremendously increased."

IN TESTIMONY before the 11-member committee reviewing Gordon Vickery's administration, Ms. Fraser and some of the women in a training program charged the administration with sex discrimination.

This is not an unusual concern for Ms. Fraser who is perhaps best known for her activity in the women's-rights movement. She is one of the founding members of Radical Women, a socialist organization of "political radicals dedicated to exposing, resisting and eliminating the inequities of women's existence."

The group grew out of a class Ms. Fraser taught at the University of Washington's Free University in the early 1960s on women and society.
IN APRIL OF 1972 she was one of the panelists at an open meeting sponsored by Radical Women on "1972: The Year for Organized Struggle by Women."

At this year's annual Radical Women's conference, held in July, the theme was "Socialist Feminism: The Struggle to Build a National Working Class Women's Movement."

Clara Fraser is committed to a changed society, a society which she envisions would place supreme value on individual dignity and human rights. In 1970, during a struggle for day care at the U.W., she said the way to bring about that kind of change was "through pressure on institutions to change themselves."

A FEW EMPLOYES have accused Ms. Fraser of using the City Light dispute to promote her own politics.

In a statement before the review committee, Patricia G. Wong, a participant in the Electrical Trades Trainee program, said that she felt "bitter resentment to being utilized by Ms. Clara Fraser as a pawn in her political power plays against ... Gordon Vickery."

Ms. Wong said that she felt there had been a "constant overemphasis on the necessity of the trainees' establishing an intimate solidarity together ... a sisterhood."

But to Clara Fraser, encouraging solidarity has been a lifelong occupation and the employee participation in the City Light dispute is the type of action that sustains her.

"It's very moralizing to be with real people and see their heroic attempts to change things," she said. "It's wonderful to see people say 'I won't be oppressed any more' and demand new policies which guarantee dignity."

"What's happening in City Light is revolutionary," she explains, her enthusiasm obvious. "There is a new sense of consciousness among workers that they deserve and can function in a management capacity. Management is no longer the function of an elite—a worker's democracy is developing."

MS. FRASER has been employed in human-rights programs since 1967.

Before that, she worked as a fashion copy writer, a cab driver, a printer, a factory worker and a secretary.

After five or six years as a secretary in the office of two psychiatrists, she felt she "had to get out because it was so foreign to my approach to things. I believe in the therapy of human alliance, in joint action with other people in a common cause and common purpose."

In June, 1973, she was hired by City Light as the coordinator of the Electrical Trades Trainee program. Just short of one year later, the employee walk-out occurred and since then the City Light dispute has been a night-and-day concern for her.

"I believe a person has got to be involved," she emphasizes. "You have got to try to achieve social change and help your fellow person. Otherwise, what's life all about?"
Sparks fly over training program

By LEE MORIWAKI

City Light's landmark electrical - trades training program for women is drawing to a stormy conclusion with only mixed success at best.

Two trainees were hired Wednesday as line-crew helpers, the second step in their quest for status as journeywomen electricians.

But City Light officials said the training program, a possible first in the nation, is scheduled to end September 24. There appears to be no hope of retaining the other women trainees.

And a sex-discrimination complaint, filed against the Seattle utility by eight of the ten trainees who entered the program in June, 1974, is still pending before the city's Office of Women's Rights. The agency is expected to rule in the case soon.

THE COMPLAINT was filed by Daisy Jones (who has since left the program for another job), Angel Arrasmith, Teri Bach, Heidi Durham, Megan Cornish, Jody Olvera, Jennifer Gordon (one of the two trainees who have been hired as helpers) and Letha Ann Neal.

They charged that they were underschooled and underpaid compared to male workers, and that City Light "retaliated" against them for filing the complaint.

The two trainees who did not sign the complaint were Patricia Gayle Wong and Marjorie D. Wakenight. Ms. Wong was the second trainee to be named a helper, and Ms. Wakenight is no longer with the program, although she had joined in the criticism of the program while a participant.

Ms. Wong has stated she would not let herself become a "pawn" in any power plays and was "tired of being pressured to become one with the group." She also said that although the program did not get off to a good start and that she objected to the trainees being set apart as an "elite" group, the program generally was "worthwhile."

THOUGH CITY Light Supt. Gordon Vickery said the training program accomplished its "major objective" of preparing the women for the line-crew helper's Civil Service examination, Ms. Durham retorted:

"Management hasn't accepted its responsibility for affirmative action. After they spent money training us, they're going to turn some of us out in the street."

Heidi Durham, member of a City Light training program for women, loaded wire onto one of the utility's trucks in the north end yesterday. It appears her career may be stalled.—Staff photo by Richard S. Heyz.
Since the trainees began work June 24, 1974, close to $134,000 has been paid out for their salaries, according to City Light officials.

Despite trainee charges that the money will have been wasted if they are let go, Carole V. Coe, City Light's director of administrative services, said:

"We've never promised anyone a job out of the program... We wanted to prepare them to compete in what was essentially a man's field."

Ms. Coe said the trainees may well be able to find jobs with other electrical utilities in the region. Nor have they been scratched off the list of candidates for City Light helper's positions, should the jobs open up.

Ms. Coe said City Light had only two openings for helpers, and that Ms. Gordon and Ms. Wong were the top two women qualifiers in an open, competitive Civil Service examination. They were selected over a number of men who scored as well or even a little higher, she added.

HOWEVER, one of the trainees, Teri Bach, said City Light officials reneged on a promise to give her, and that Ms. Gordon and Ms. Wong were the top two women qualifiers in an open, competitive Civil Service examination. They were selected over a number of men who scored as well or even a little higher, she added.

Ms. Bach, who had hopes of becoming a linewoman working on high-voltage utility poles, said she believes City Light management was "building a case" to get rid of her. She said City Light has a pattern of taking reprisals against employees who "speak out" or "expose mismanagement policies" at the utility.

She was the target of two anonymous letters in the past year, and drew a three-day suspension in April, which she has appealed for what City Light officials said was her refusal to cooperate during an interview about one of the complaints.

THAT COMPLAINT, in late March of this year, came from a letter writer who charged that members of a City Light crew had been drinking on the job. Ms. Bach flatly denies she had been drinking, although City Light officials say some of the other crew members were suspended after admitting to having a beer while on duty.

Ms. Bach maintains she was cooperative during the meeting with her supervisor, Walter Sickler. She explained her objections to the interview, however, in a letter to Charles Silvernale, business representative for Local 77 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers:

"After reading the anonymous letter Mr. Sickler presented to me, I emphasized that I considered the charges leveled against me were totally outrageous. I reminded Mr. Sickler that this was the second time within four months that I had been called onto the carpet to defend myself against false and anonymous charges. In addition, I protested the harassment inflicted on me and fellow workers by management's repeated investigations of anonymous accusations."

(Mike Sharar, City Light's community-affairs coordinator, estimated that the utility gets 15 to 20 employee-related complaints a year. The complaints are looked into as a matter of course, he said, although the anonymous letters "carry a whole lot less weight" than signed ones. "Certainly we don't want to run a police state with our employees, but we have an obligation to our consumers (to listen to their complaints)," said Sharar.)

THE OTHER letter Ms. Bach referred to was sent to Vickery last December from "A Poed Citizen" who had come upon a four-member City Light work crew that included "a Negro and a girl." The writer said, "The Negro couldn't keep his hands off the girl. In the 28 minutes I spent observing some nearby construction I noticed the Negro standing, smoking, and publically fondling the girl while the other two worked."

All City Light management would have to do, said Ms. Bach, "is keep an anonymous letter a month coming in and they'd be ready to get rid of me."

Ms. Bach isn't the only one to raise the question of retaliation in the part of Vickery and other City Light officials.

Susan B. Magee, director of the Office of Women's Rights, warned Vickery last December about "retaliation after the City Light superintendent wrote to the women trainees that they either participate in the training program as outlined by the Lighting Department or be terminated."

Vickery's memorandum was prompted by a letter of protest sent him on November 15, 1974 by nine of the trainees. Only Ms. Wong declined to sign. The two-page letter called the training program "a phony show... We are getting no special training in this very unusual 'training' program. The only things that distinguish us from electrical helpers or apprentices are that we are far lower paid (they started..."
at $3.90 an hour with salary increments to $4.52 now, compared to the first-step hourly wage of $5.20 for an electrical or lineman helper, according to City Light officials), get no special training, are not eligible for duties and benefits of other union members . . . have unequal facilities, no voice about what happens to us, and no job security."

THE TRAINEES presented a list of 15 "urgent needs" for the program, including reinstatement of Clara Fraser as full-time coordinator and advocate for the electrical-trades training program.

Ms. Fraser was not reinstated. In fact, she is no longer with City Light. Ms. Fraser, who has publicly criticized Vickery and emerged as a leader of dissident City Light employees in disputes with management, said she was "laid off with 15 minutes notice" last month. A City Light spokesman said that Ms. Fraser, a provisional, non-civil-service employee, was caught in the cutback of 100 City Light workers. But Ms. Fraser said she was the victim of a program by Mayor Wes Uhlman to create an atmosphere of fear among city employees.

VICKERY wrote the trainees, on December 6, 1974, in response to their earlier letter, "Management at City Light has a firm commitment to making this unique training program a success . . . On the other hand, we are finding that internal dissension and unwillingness of the trainees to accept or follow management's decisions or directives pertaining to the program threatens to destroy the program and the concept.

"In view of this, then, I have decided to leave the decision to each of you individually as to whether or not you care to continue on at City Light as an electrical-trades trainee. A decision to remain will necessitate your agreeing to participate in the program as outlined, defined and directed by the Lighting Department.

"Of course, any issues concerning negotiable items would continue to be handled by your union representative, and properly so . . ."

"If you do not care to continue on, we do have many others who are anxious to participate in this program . . ."

Ms. Magee of the city's Office of Women's Rights responded in a letter to Vickery: "Certainly, any termination of the trainees on the basis of this memo would be considered retaliation and processed accordingly under law."

Ms. Magee declined to discuss the matter with a reporter, however, since the case is still pending.

WHEN ASKED IF City Light will continue with some type of women's training program when the present one ends next month, Vickery said, "I don't know. Maybe we will, maybe we won't."

He acknowledged there have been "a number of problems" with the program, but said problems crop up with any new project.

"I'm happy that we achieved the major objective of the program, which was to give them an extra advantage in preparing for the Civil Service examination for helper."

Vickery said that, despite the criticism, "We have been the one utility that I know of that's had the courage and dedication to institute the women's training program."