The initial platform proclaimed by the nascent Communist Party of Canada in 1922 made no specific mention of gender inequality or woman’s role in the revolutionary movement. Within two years, however, the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) had altered this oversight by setting up a Women’s Department and spearheading the formation of a national organization for working-class women, the Women’s Labor League (WLL). The Communist Party’s approach to the woman question was conditioned primarily by its response to the advice of the Communist International, or Comintern, and secondly, by the party’s own analysis of the needs of working-class women. In the last resort, the advice of Soviet Communists was refracted through the prism of local traditions, ideas, and realities. While the CPC’s ethnic complexion and its emphasis on a class analysis of women’s oppression signified continuity with the prewar socialist movement, Communists also sought to transcend their past, embracing a new social and sexual order that included the emancipation of women. And although the CPC remained a weak force within Canadian political life of the 1920s, its agitational work on women’s issues did mark out new parameters of thought and action for Canadian socialism.

Admittedly, the woman question never became a central priority for the CPC, a consequence of internal party failings and external social pressures. Despite the Communists’ connection to the “successful” Russian revolution, their vision of a new order for women remained marginal — even within their own movement. Although many noble convention resolutions declared the need to organize women, the party itself mirrored some of the formidable structures of inequality and oppression facing women in wider Canadian society.
During the twenties, the influence of the Comintern on the Communist Party of Canada with regard to the woman question was very powerful, in part because the International was generally the guiding influence on its member parties, but additionally because reforms within Russian society appeared to herald major, inspiring advances towards women’s emancipation. Soviet women were accorded political equality, registration of civil marriage was instituted, abortions legalized, and a new family law code established women’s equal status in marriage. In 1919, the Soviet Communist Party set up the Zhenotdel, a women’s section that attempted educational work — everything from literacy classes to conferences for working women — to draw women into political activity. The barriers to its work were immense: Zhenotdel workers had to contend with the economic chaos and poverty of postrevolutionary Russia; male hostility, even from within communist circles, to women’s political activism; and firmly entrenched cultural barriers to women’s emancipation, especially in the peasant villages and in the Muslim East. Despite these obstacles, the Zhenotdel waged a highly successful educational campaign, “achieving in its work, a major impact on Soviet society, especially in the cities.” Contemporary Bolshevik leaders, however, became increasingly alarmed at the Zhenotdel’s “feminist tendencies,” and in 1929, when the Central Committee Secretariat of the Party was reorganized, the Zhenotdel was effectively eliminated. Its demise, of course, was linked to the triumph of Stalinism and the liquidation of any organizations that might threaten the centralized party-state.

To North American Marxists and even to some socialists and liberals, who had been concerned primarily with transforming the productive process and according women political equality, the Russian example initially appeared to be a beacon of hope. Within the CPC, the Russian reforms stimulated new discussion of gender inequality and the organization of working women. From the Communist International and Impreccor, Canadian Communist leaders gleaned information on Zhenotdel activities, conferences, theses, and Bolshevik resolutions on the mobilization of women. Directives from the International Women’s Secretariat of the Communist International urged the establishment of a Communist
women’s organization in Canada, and Soviet reforms in marriage, divorce, and abortion laws fostered similar debates in Canada, opening up women’s issues that had rarely been discussed by the prewar socialist movement and, indeed, were rarely discussed in the subsequent history of the Communist Party.

The recommendations for the organization of women made by the International Women’s Secretariat essentially represented traditions already part of the Canadian Left: the unionization of wage-earning women and the establishment of support groups for working-class housewives. After the party decided to work openly in 1922, a Women’s Department was set up to co-ordinate these activities. The first director, Florence Custance, remains a vaguely defined figure in Communist history, in part due to her early death in 1929. Born in England and trained as a schoolteacher, Custance immigrated to Canada with her husband, a carpenter, and she became involved in the labour movement as a leader of the Amalgamated Carpenters of Canada Wives Auxiliary. By the time of World War I she was deeply involved in the Socialist Party of North America, and in 1919 she was a participant in the secret Guelph Convention that established the CPC. In the 1920s she occupied strategically important party positions and headed the Canadian Friends of Soviet Russia. A somewhat reserved intellectual rather than an “agitational” leader, Custance also became the driving force behind the organization of the Communist women’s movement. In May 1922, shortly before she left for the fourth Comintern Congress in Moscow, Custance’s Women’s Department announced its existence with a public meeting attended by about two hundred. The Worker sporadically carried news of the Women’s Department until a regular women’s column, coordinated by Custance and entitled “The Working Women’s Section” began to give more frequent coverage to the woman question. Finally, in 1926, Custance initiated The Woman Worker, a separate newspaper written by and for the Women’s Labor Leagues.

Following repeated directives of the International to set up a working-class women’s organization to be guided by the party, Custance turned her energies also to the Women’s Labor Leagues (WLLs). The labor leagues followed in the tradition of the prewar SDPC Finnish sewing circles and took their name directly from existing WLLs, which had been established as adjuncts to labour parties and socialist groups, sometimes with links to
the trade union movement. Gradually, Custance and other Communist women began to join and form their own WLLs, and in 1924 a federal WLL apparatus for the growing movement was established at a conference in London, following that year’s Trades and Labour Congress convention. Elected national secretary at that conference, Custance announced that the leagues would enjoy some local autonomy, although they would be guided by the general goals of the larger Federation of WLLs.

Much to its chagrin, the federation was denied formal affiliation to the TLC, supposedly because its members, as housewives, were not “producers.” Custance drew strong applause from women delegates when she retorted that male trade unionists “lived in the Middle Ages” and should “wake up” to the fact that WLL members “are women who cook, sew, wash, scrub, and who perform duties necessary to the whole process of production.” The presence of Communists like Custance on the WLL executive, however, was likely the true reason for some TLC members’ hostility to the leagues. Rejection of the WLLs by the TLC was a disappointing setback for Custance, for affiliation had been part of the party’s larger United Front scheme to work within and influence the labour movement. At the local level, some WLLs had more success with this strategy. In 1924, for example, the Toronto WLL affiliated with the Toronto and District Labour Council, and over the next three years it earned praise from trade union men. But in 1927 this amiable relationship ended abruptly with the WLL’s expulsion from the council. A campaign against the league was led by socialist Jimmy Simpson, who had heartily endorsed the WLL in 1924 but now objected to its Communist membership.

The Women’s Labor Leagues, like the larger CPC, also tried to play a role in the young Canadian Labor Party (CLP). In the early 1920s labourites participated in some local WLLs and contributed to The Woman Worker. WLLs in turn attended Labor Party conventions and successfully lobbied for resolutions on issues like “no cadet training in the schools,” which most socialists and labourites alike supported. Only in 1927, however, were Communists able to dominate the resolutions agenda, and this was a shallow victory, as labourites had decided to abandon the CLP, leaving Communists to occupy its shell. In the West, the WLLs also participated in the Western Women’s Social and Economic Conferences, initiated by labourite Beatrice Brigden in 1924. In the first few years, the WLLs easily
carried motions from their own program, such as demands for better minimum wage laws. But by the late 1920s, Communist women became increasingly disturbed by the conference’s reformist viewpoint and its paternalistic concentration on issues like sterilization of the “feebleminded.” Unable to mould a majority that was Marxist and Communist in outlook, the WLLs eventually withdrew from active participation.

By 1927, the WLLs had become predominantly Communist in outlook. Only a minority of WLL women were party members, but most were willing to accept political guidance from the CPC’s Women’s Department. As the number of Labor Leagues grew to thirty-seven at the end of 1927, they also came to reflect the ethnic strengths of the Communist Party, with Finnish leagues outnumbering the English-speaking ones. Jewish, Ukrainian, and Finnish women were also organized through their respective ethnic organizations: the Jewish Labor League, the Finnish Organization of Canada, and the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association. Finnish and Jewish women, however, participated in Labor Leagues that were loosely, sometimes closely, linked to the Party’s Women’s Department. Ukrainian women, on the other hand, belonged to the Women’s Section of the ULFTA, answered to ULFTA’s Central Committee, and usually had less contact with the English WLLs.

Organizing Women Workers

Whatever the organizational differences based on ethnicity, there was basic agreement on the overall perception of the woman question. Capitalism, emphasized the first WLL constitution, had created two kinds of labour: “household drudgery and wage labour . . . both of which were essential to the maintenance of capitalism.” Revolutionaries, Custance argued, must therefore fight for women’s right to organize and for equal pay, as well as for the protection of mothers and children. Moreover, “working class women must struggle for equality along with men of their own class, refusing to be used as scabs or wage-reducers” and unswayed by the false arguments of the feminist movement. Sex, it was stressed, was “a minor question compared to the class struggle . . . we must first take up the struggle against capitalist tyranny which keeps our husbands chained to uncertainty and us to worry and desperation . . . and our children to want.”

The Communist Party and the Woman Question, 1922–1929

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Throughout the 1920s these basic tenets — the economic exploitation of women and the imperative of unified revolutionary action — were stressed again and again. Prewar socialist parties had taken a similar approach, but the Communist Party was distinguished by its new emphasis on the woman question and by a measure of sympathy for women’s particular oppression within capitalism. Worker articles, for instance, emphasized the necessity of bringing the “most oppressed” group — women — into revolutionary politics, to help them “work out their own emancipation.” The Woman Worker, unabashedly political, proclaimed its intention to forgo all the traditional “fashions, recipes and sickly love stories” of other women’s papers. It kept its promise and concentrated on women’s struggle for “equal duties and rights with men” as well as women’s specific “fight against customs, traditions, and superstitions which have kept them chained to passive roles and conservatism.”

The WLLs were the centerpiece of the Communist Party’s attempts to put its theory on the woman question into practice and were intended to join together women in the home and women in the workforce, a task the party immediately found problematic. Young and/or single women cadres, with their greater freedom to travel, were more likely to be active as organizers for the Young Communist League (YCL) or as industrial agitators, while it was the married “Party wives,” tied closely to home and family, who concentrated on the support work associated with the WLLs. The Labor Leagues, explained one Finnish woman, were made up of women like her mother who “mainly did fund-raising and social affairs” along with an “important attempt at political education.” That “the WLLs were for the housewives, not the women in the factories” became the common perception. Ironically, in keeping with predominant social norms, many homemakers might be charged, especially in the absence of their travelling revolutionary husbands, with the difficult tasks of feeding and clothing the family, but not with the task of political and labour organizing. In Britain, one historian argues, a very sharp separation existed between the “cadres” and the “Party wives,” with the latter held in some contempt by the former. In contrast, the Canadian WLLs occasionally did draw both groups together, but even though the two groups were not hostile, differences did exist. And clearly, the party lamented the housewife composition of the WLLs, for according to advice
from Moscow, as well as traditional Marxist thinking, the mobilization of wage-earning women should have priority.

To facilitate this work with wage-earning women, the CPC’s Women’s Department studied the economic, legal, and social status of working women and published its findings in the founding WLL leaflet. The vast majority of wage earners, the WLL document declared, laboured in unskilled jobs, often without even the protection of the minimum wage. Low wages, long hours, and unsafe working conditions were convincing indications of the necessity to unionize these women: a Comintern directive was hardly needed to encourage revolutionaries’ disgust with the lot of Canadian women workers.

Desperate working conditions, however, do not necessarily make unionization an easy prospect. Custance believed there were four substantial obstacles to the party’s work with wage-earning women, including the influence of religious, social, and pacifist organizations like the YWCA, which “pose as protectors of the working girls”; the organized welfare programs of factories; to a certain extent the misleading protection of the minimum wage laws; and, lastly, the fact that “women do not take wage-earning seriously” but see it as a “temporary necessity” before marriage. Whatever the presumed consciousness of working women, the structural realities of their work lives — seasonal and unskilled work, small workplaces, and a high turnover — did mitigate against their organization. Furthermore, women could draw little aid from the established trade union movement, for the conservative TLC, weakened by the 1921–22 depression, membership losses, and employer overtures and offensives, had little or no time for the concerns of working women.

The party’s initial trade union strategies, however, also tended to exclude women. In the early 1920s the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU), a Comintern organization, urged its member parties to work within established trade unions. Women’s marginal status in the union movement meant that they were easily bypassed by these strategies, which concentrated on areas of established radical support, such as mining and lumbering. Other suggestions for organizing wage-earning women were similarly inappropriate: the Comintern’s repeated advice to initiate “mass delegate meetings from the factory nuclei” of activist
women belied the Canadian reality of an extremely weak radical presence in most women’s workplaces. Finally, organizing new locals of unions was a time-consuming and expensive enterprise that the small, poorly funded Women’s Department was ill-equipped to pursue on its own. Ultimately, if the wage-earning woman failed to take herself seriously, so, too, did the CPC. In its self-criticism, the party openly admitted its efforts with working women were lacking: “The material at the disposal of the Party to carry on this,” reported Custance in 1927, “has been up to the present limited and weak. Therefore, much that could have been done has been left undone.”

Despite these failures, the Women’s Department did give attention to the plight of working women in its own press. The “Working Women’s Section” and later The Woman Worker abounded with personal and second-hand descriptions of the day-to-day existence of working girls and women, often followed by an analysis of women’s wage labour under capitalism written by Custance or perhaps by Becky Buhay, a young organizer quickly growing into a party leader. The problems of working women were also debated in Kamf, Vaupaus, and Robitnysia. The Kamf’s Women’s Section, for example, printed the tale of a Jewish garment worker describing the speed-up and unhealthy conditions in her Montreal factory. In reply, Buhay pointed out that terrible conditions could only be effectively combated with a union, and that the “false consciousness” of the author’s fellow French-Canadian workers should be faced squarely with gentle reprimands for their frivolous ways. Sometimes advice like this lectured working women, telling them, for instance, to eschew “charm and personality” courses at the YWCA and “thoughts of catching Prince Charming” and instead to educate themselves to the class struggle. Still, letters were not always greeted with paternalism; they were given encouraging, though simple advice: keep on fighting for your rights, organize a union, and find support in the revolutionary movement.

The Women’s Department also developed a campaign to expose the violations and inadequacies of the minimum wage laws, thus “showing the ineffectiveness of government protection as compared with that of unions.” In the fall of 1924, for instance, the Toronto WLL pursued evidence that the Willard Chocolate Company, which had prosecuted girls
for stealing fifty cents worth of candy, was falsifying its time cards and that the Minimum Wage Board had only taken steps when the workers secured a lawyer. Even then, the board urged no publicity, supposedly for the sake of Willard’s. This famous ‘Chocolate Case’ became a labour cause célèbre, but despite WLL and Labour Council pressure, public hearings did not produce a conclusive conviction of the employer. Nevertheless, the CPC continued to press home the message that the Minimum Wage Board was essentially afraid of business, and that the government was hardly a “neutral” body acting to protect women. The Women’s Labor Leagues produced evidence at the annual board hearing to show that the suggested “minimum” wage could barely support a working woman, and that it often became the “maximum” wage for women. Across Canada, newly organized WLLs also took up cases of minimum wage abuse; the campaign was visible in Vancouver, Montreal, Winnipeg, and Regina, where an Employed Girls Council, initiated by the WLL, had some small successes in pressuring the government to close loopholes in the legislation. Florence Custance played a pivotal role in the Ontario effort, making useful alliances with local Labour Councils and the Canadian Labor Party. Her effort even earned her praise from the labourite paper, the People’s Cause, which commended Custance’s stubborn persistence in tracking down employers who were ducking the law.17

Finally, in the later 1920s, a few WLLs were also able to spark the creation of social and support groups for young working women. In such cities as Sudbury and Toronto, for instance, Finnish Communists established organizations for Finnish maids. Though not officially trade unions, these organizations did aim to improve the work lives of domestics, while also offering social and recreational activities. Once an economic downturn set in, they tried to prevent “unscrupulous” employment agents such as an infamous Lutheran minister in Toronto, from taking advantage of unemployed Finnish women by offering them jobs at low wages. “Maids,” cried out one circular in Vapaus, “join the membership of Finnish maids organization, where you have no bosses, no clerical hirelings, only yourselves . . . we will strengthen our mutual enterprises and act for our education, and amusement too.”18
Organizing Housewives

The second aim of the CPC’s Women’s Department was to mobilize women in the home by setting up housewives’ auxiliaries that would aid men’s struggles and concurrently develop women’s revolutionary consciousness. Communists strongly believed that working-class women were a conservative influence on their families; like Lenin, they saw women, isolated amidst domestic drudgery, as easy prey for the illusory myths of a capitalist society. “Women,” wrote Custance in a Women’s Department report, “are almost entirely under capitalist class influence, through the church and the newspapers.”¹⁹ Nowhere was this more boldly stated than in the Ukrainian press, which claimed that women were poorly educated, sometimes illiterate, their class consciousness low, and their knowledge of politics in general and Marxism in particular almost nonexistent. Indeed, ULFTA set up a separate newspaper for women, Robitnysia (The Working Woman), specifically as an educational tool to “bring women up to the level of men.” Unlike the Finnish or English Communist papers, Robitnysia saw illiteracy as a major obstacle in its work among women, indicating that Ukrainian women did have more serious barriers to political involvement than many other party women. Robitnysia was concerned not only with teaching women to read, and the fundamentals of Marx, but also with basic scientific education. A popular science section including articles such as “Charles Darwin” and “Where Did Man Come From?” was designed to wean women away from superstitious and religious interpretations of natural phenomena.

Communists were especially concerned that wives of trade unionists be made sympathetic and active supporters of their husbands in struggle, for “women can determine the fate of a strike, make, or mar men’s morale.”²⁰ While the party recognized the essential role that women played in labour struggles, it also projected a simplified view of working-class women that placed women at polar ends of the political spectrum. Women were supposedly suspicious of social change and socialism, but when their revolutionary consciousness was raised they became militant fighters, even more militant than men. “Will women speed the liberation of society or be the bulwark of reaction?” was the classic question asked by the Communist press.²¹ As Dorothy Smith notes, “working-class
women are portrayed either as ‘backward’ or as salt of the earth heroic figures; both are polar positions along a single dimension.”

How do we explain this extremely prevalent view of women’s “innate” conservatism? It is possible, first, that women’s apathy or cynicism was interpreted as conservatism or, second, that this view of women as “backward” was simply the product of strong male prejudices that female party leaders, such as Becky Buhay, were not hesitant to criticize. Ukrainians, she once charged, “have the old peasant attitudes on this question [of women] . . . . They say a woman talks too much and can’t be trusted. . . . In Lethbridge . . . they even suspended a woman from the meetings.”

At the same time, it is possible that women were less interested in politics because of the material realities of their lives and the powerful ideological message that women “belonged in the home.” If Ukrainian women lacked the opportunity to learn how to read, if Jewish women were shut out of union drives, if Finnish and English women were pressed to finish their domestic work in the home — by definition a never-ending job — then it is hardly surprising that they had little time for the party.

Despite fears of female conservatism, women, it was believed, could be radicalized. Housewives were reminded of the limited material conditions of their lives, the drudgery of endless domestic labour, the meagre wages of their husbands, and the limited opportunities facing their children. In a short story published in The Worker, two working-class housewives talk over the fence about the effects of war and unemployment on their homes. The narrator’s husband, a veteran, is unemployed: the “British Vampire,” his wife explains, “took his best and left him no will to fight.”

The story’s final message is clear: the role of a housewife was to bind her husband and family together despite and against an unjust, exploitative capitalist society. Stories and poems, some of which were made into plays, were also found in Robitnysia, depicting arguments to drive home the realities of class and the need for homemakers to join in the fight against injustice. In one story a housewife demonstrates to her husband that his unwillingness to let her join a women’s organization plays into the hands of the bosses; other stories portrayed the suffering of mothers who could not feed their children, whose sons were exhausted by work, or whose daughters had to resort to prostitution to make ends meet.
Communists assumed that women in the home did understand in a personal way the consequences of unemployment, low wages, and rising prices. Thus, the task of the party was to “make the personal, political,” and to this end, homemakers were frequently appealed to on consumer and peace issues. The Communist press reflected the prevailing notion that men were the breadwinners, while women supervised the family budget; rising consumer prices were therefore seized on as a potentially radical issue for homemakers. Similarly, articles on peace, which had a high profile in *The Woman Worker*, tried to personalize international issues by appealing to women on the basis of their maternal instincts. The peace appeal also attempted to expose war as a consequence of capitalist economics and imperialist expansion, but the materialist theme was intertwined with the maternal one. Not only will you lose your sons, these articles pointed out, but you will lose them in a war that will bring you hunger and capitalists greater profits.

While *The Woman Worker* urged its readers to reject the liberal pacifism represented by the United Nations Organization and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WIL), it shared the WIL's emphasis on maternalism, though shaping it into a class-conscious mould. Associated with the antiwar cause was the campaign to remove military training from the schools, thereby eliminating the capitalist and militarist indoctrination of working-class youth. In keeping with United Front tactics, the WLLs tried to link forces with other reformers on this issue, and Custance attempted herself to run for the Toronto School Board, including “no cadet training” in her platform.25

As well as appealing to working-class women on issues of bread and peace, the party encouraged women’s active support for the labour struggles of their men folk. Though women sometimes played a crucial role in strikes, it was difficult to sustain their involvement in ongoing political organizations, so *The Worker* and *The Woman Worker* used their columns to publicize numerous examples of wives’ militancy, and to encourage their further political action. During a cross-country tour for *The Worker*, Becky Buhay found herself in the midst of a coal miners’ strike in Alberta. She helped the wives organize a support group that clashed more than once with police. After the most violent exchange on the picket line, eighteen women were injured, one suffered a miscarriage, and many were jailed.
and sentenced on charges of rioting. *The Worker* followed their cases, which Buhay used as inspiring evidence that women, when aroused, could be excellent revolutionary fighters: “The women’s defiant attitude was the greatest surprise to the authorities who expected tears, supplications and general weakness, but they discovered before long that women were made of sterner stuff.”

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**The Family and Reproductive Rights**

Although economic issues, especially the family wage and the workplace, were central to the Communist Party’s approach to work among women, it did not totally ignore reproductive issues or women’s subordination in the family. Some party leaders, but particularly Custance, were aware of the important writings of Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai on love, marriage, and the family, though Kollontai’s ideas were probably reinterpreted or dismissed by the end of the decade, as she fell out of favour in Russia. In their discussion of women’s role in the family, Canadian Communists wrestled with lingering patriarchal traditions and new revolutionary ideas. Working-class women were idealized and commended for their selfless devotion to home and motherhood, but Communists also criticized a society that tied women to “household drudgery” and argued that to be truly free, women had to be relieved of the degrading labour of “providing services to others, . . . living by the sufferance of one’s husband.” “Complete freedom is impossible as long as men are the privileged sex,” continued another article on this topic, and women were advised to “break through their bonds of timidity and through self assertion help to achieve their own emancipation.”

Canadian Communists were certainly sympathetic to Leninist conclusions about the need to liberate women from domestic toil, but it was never clear how that would happen. As late as 1925, after most Russian communal kitchens had closed, they were referred to positively in the Canadian Communist press. By the end of the decade, however, they were largely forgotten; the socialization of domestic labour never became a major point of discussion for the party.

The CPC also wrestled with the issues of birth control and abortion. A call for mothers’ clinics, which were to dispense birth control, was
part of the first WLL platform, though Communists always carefully placed the demand for birth control within a class analysis, rejecting neo-Malthusian justifications for control of working-class births. Poverty, Florence Custance reminded her readers in *The Woman Worker*, was not due to the size of the population but to the distribution of wealth, and fewer births would not solve the poverty problem. The party’s approach to reproductive issues was also influenced by the example of the USSR, which had legalized abortion and birth control to provide immediate economic and physiological relief for working-class women. Like the Soviets, the CPC stressed the health benefits to working-class wives, rather than presenting birth control as the inalienable right of every woman, though the latter view may have been held by some Communist women. Statistics showing maternal ill health and a high incidence of maternal and infant mortality, for example, were often used to buttress the WLL’s arguments for mothers’ clinics. Emma Goldman’s more radical libertarian perspective on birth control was resolutely rejected; in 1927, her Canadian speeches on birth control were ignored by the Communist press. Rather, the party promoted its own class analysis, which stressed the right of the working-class family to make their own decisions about family size, and working-class wives’ need for relief from the physical burdens of constant child bearing.

While quite different from the contemporary feminist rationale for reproductive control, the Communist Party’s support for mothers’ clinics was still a small crack in the wall of silence existing in Canadian society in the 1920s. Unlike the United States, Canada had not yet produced a birth control movement of any substance, and given the persisting medical, clerical, and legal opposition to birth control, the subject was largely taboo. Despite the illegality of disseminating birth control information, women were eager, even desperate, to obtain this information, and abortion was sometimes attempted as the last resort in fertility control. Pressure from rank-and-file women was clearly one impetus to the party’s discussion of the subject. Immediately after an article on birth control appeared in *The Worker*, an Alberta comrade responded by insisting that birth control was “an essential information for working-class women in the here and now . . . an indispensable psychological aid to working-class marriage,” and he urged the party to devote more space to the subject.
In the columns of *The Woman Worker* the issue was even more hotly debated, and Custance noted that concern with birth control was a major drawing card for women’s interest in the WLLs.

Rank-and-file letters to *The Woman Worker* indicated the wide parameters the birth control debate assumed. In its first issue *The Woman Worker* reprinted a speech given to a Vancouver WLL, which took the radical line “that every woman should have the right to decide when to have children.” The subsequent responses of readers, however, revealed the persistence of more conservative eugenicist ideas within the WLLs, paralleling their strength in the wider society. One Toronto member challenged religious objections to birth control but then went on to argue for a “scientific view,” saying “we can no longer breed numerically without thinking about intelligence and quality of offspring.” The most extreme eugenicist wrote in, warning that forcing women into child bearing might “breed race degeneracy.” The writer drew proof for her contention from the “fact” that the “priest-ridden Poles, Slavs and Italians have weak and sickly children.” Although these views were printed in *The Woman Worker*, editorials tended to downplay eugenics, and they completely rejected any hint of neo-Malthusian support for birth control.

In terms of political action, some local WLLs pressed city government for mothers’ clinics and lobbied the Canadian Labour Party to place birth control in its platform. While the Labor Leagues were successful in making mothers’ clinics part of the CLP policy, they were less successful in gaining wider public attention or government sympathy. Toronto League members described being literally “laughed at” by local government officials during one lobbying attempt; the issue, tersely commented a WLLer, “is not supported by the Establishment.” But even within the party, there was some hesitancy to embrace the birth control cause. Robitnysia simply avoided the issue, and after the establishment of *The Woman Worker*, so, too, did *The Worker*. Though *The Worker* editors may have felt that birth control was a “woman’s issue,” this meant that there was little wider party discussion and recognition of the seriousness of WLL demands for mothers’ clinics.

The issue of abortion was also dealt with by the party, though in a secondary, quiet manner. Abortion, too, was analyzed from a materialist perspective that stressed the immediate needs and social reality of...
working-class women. Readers were sometimes reminded of new access to abortion in the Soviet Union, and similar liberalization was recommended for Canada. But abortion was described as an unpleasant and unfortunate practice, resorted to only in capitalist societies or a Communist society in transition. The author of a rare article on abortion maintained that “we are for less and less abortions; they could be reduced to a minimum with birth control information made available.”35 Still, the writer continued, the laws should be reformed, for they were routinely disobeyed by doctors and women, to the danger of women’s health and life. Although different in content from later feminist arguments stressing women’s right to choose, the CPC’s occasional calls for liberalization were very radical in a time when church, state, and the medical profession would barely countenance discussion of the topic. This intense opposition, along with the party’s own ambivalence, may be the reason that the year 1927 saw the last major discussion of abortion in the CPC press for many years.

International Mentors and Local Opponents

Articles in the Communist press dealing with abortion, birth control, and women’s role in the family often drew dramatic comparisons between the oppression of Canadian women and the constantly improving lives of Russian women. While the Communist press primarily pointed to women’s equal political status and economic independence in the USSR, attention was also given to women’s new sexual autonomy and the emergence of an egalitarian family life. Marriage laws, “no longer made only to benefit men,” and the accessibility of divorce were destroying the patriarchal family, the press claimed. With the disappearance of sexual inequalities, the double standard, and economic dependence, Russian women were said to “feel like they are real human beings . . . equal to male workers.”36 Reports of Soviet life were especially vocal about the new Russian motherhood: “with the availability of birth control, aid to pregnant women and modern creches, we have abolished women’s subordination,” declared one optimistic author.37

It is difficult to assess how thoroughly these optimistic views of Soviet life were assimilated by Communist women. Certainly, leaders like Becky Buhay displayed an intense admiration for Soviet life, even in private
letters written during her visits to the USSR. Surely, however, romantic pronouncements on the USSR also served to obscure the complexity of women’s oppression and the extent to which it was embedded in both Russian and Canadian society. Of course, one-dimensional Worker articles may not have reflected Communists’ private experience of altered sex roles and the family.

Within the party, new forms of relationships and family arrangements were accepted, although only to a limited extent. In the prewar socialist movement, Finnish women had turned a critical eye to marriage, and Finnish Communists were known to opt for common-law liaisons rather than legal marriages. They made a political point of rejecting church-sanctioned relationships: “we didn’t believe in that religious hocus pocus,” remembers one Finnish comrade; “when we were married our friends gave us a party . . . or you might put an ad in the paper with our friends’ greetings and congratulations.” As a result of such experimentation, some members must have experienced the difficulties of living out female “independence” in a sexist society. The rejection of traditional relationships potentially had a tragic side: dominant social norms in the 1920s still saw such relationships as immoral, and in their defiance of these norms women could be hurt. Moreover, not all ethnic groups in the movement shared a positive view of sexual experimentation. The Ukrainian press had little sympathy for alternative relationships: the women’s paper made it quite clear that one rationale for women’s self-organization was the creation of “a new morality” to “root out habits of darkness . . . [including] promiscuity.”

Overall, information on women in the USSR still had a substantial impact on Communist Party members, creating feelings of international solidarity and party loyalty. Building on a long-established tradition of internationalism within the socialist movement, the CPC helped to galvanize anger about women’s exploitation abroad, draw lessons about women’s opposition to capitalism, and create hope and support for Communist movements of resistance. The struggles of Communist women in the Third World, the United States, and Europe figured highly in the press: stories of American textile workers battling southern police or of impoverished Chinese workers became rallying points for Communist loyalty, forging a definition of the movement as just, militant, and destined to victory.
In Canada, International Women’s Day was used to enhance international solidarity and to publicize the struggles of Canadian women. In the 1920s this day became a major event, celebrated in public meetings that were themselves international in character, encompassing one, two, or three language groups. From small towns like Blairmore, Alberta, to urban centres like Toronto, Finnish, Ukrainian, Jewish, and English women’s groups created International Women’s Day events that combined rousing political speeches, solidarity greetings, and musical entertainment. In Sudbury, reported one account, the “lady comrades worked ceaselessly on an inspirational program in English, Ukrainian and Finnish.” The evening festival began with a march to the stage by the women comrades, showing “how women in a united mass step forward to demand their rights.” Then the women sang “that ravishing workers song, the Internationale, in different languages,” and there followed a program including Ukrainian mandolin orchestras, choirs, solos, Finnish poetry readings, and speeches given in each language, detailing the rise of women in Russia and the women’s movement in Canada.42 These meetings often publicized a list of women’s demands coincident with the party program, stressing the organization of women workers and the need for mothers’ clinics and better minimum wage laws.

The tasks of Communist women were not only set out in the framework of an international struggle but were counterposed to the unacceptable political aims of Canadian middle-class feminists. By the 1920s, the resolution of the suffrage issue had dispersed much of the prewar feminist movement, but such women’s religious and reform organizations as the YWCA and the National Council of Women [NCW] were still active. The Communist leadership feared the influence of these groups on working-class women, who, they believed, might be easily patronized and swayed by their social “betters” and thus have their attention deflected from class issues. Rank-and-file Communists shared these worries. Finnish WLLer Mary North complained to The Woman Worker that working-class women in her Alberta mining town too naively accepted the opinions expressed in bourgeois women’s magazines, which pandered to women with articles on fashion and movie actresses, while Glace Bay activist Annie Whitfield bemoaned the local church’s influence on working-class women. Robitny-sia, in particular, addressed what it believed to be the dangerous religiosity
of working-class women. These fears were grounded, in part, on realistic observations of women’s participation in nonpolitical groups and on the numbing influence of antisozialist and antifeminist popular magazines and movies in the 1920s. At the same time, many of the warnings about women’s participation in middle-class culture again embraced the old adage that women’s natural deference made them easy prey to counter-revolutionary influences.

To counter the danger posed by middle-class organizations, the Communist press tried to expose the misguided, bourgeois views of women’s reform groups. In 1927, *The Woman Worker* ridiculed the NCW’s efforts to have women senators appointed and denounced the NCW’s attack on socialist Sunday schools and its resolution to “investigate communist education” in Canada. 43 In 1925, at a large Toronto meeting initiated by the WLL to discuss the “protection of womanhood,” Florence Custance laid out the WLL’s case for the unionization of women workers. *The Worker* contrasted Custance’s comments with those of Mrs. Huestis, a former suffragist, who claimed that prostitutes made an “immoral” choice of occupation, having already “succumbed to the lure of commercialized entertainment and pretty clothes.” It was clear, retorted *The Worker*, that middle-class women were interested in moral reform and “protection for the feeble-minded,” but they did not understand that for working girls the real issues were good wages and unionization. 44 There was little to quibble with in *The Worker’s* characterization of the paternalistic attitudes of reformers like Mrs. Huestis, but its biting comments didn’t solve the CPC’s basic problem of many women joining nonpolitical or moderate reform organizations rather than the WLL.

Hence, following the party’s United Front strategy of limited, but critical, participation in non-Communist groups, the Women’s Department occasionally included news items on women’s reform groups in *The Woman Worker* and, most importantly, tried to maintain contacts with women in labourite, farm, and peace organizations in the hopes of drawing them into the Communist movement. The Women’s Labor Leagues, for instance, were interested in linking up with women’s farm organizations, although they were hesitant to support farm women already allied to local Councils of Women. The National Council of Women, *The Woman Worker* tried to convince Saskatchewan women in the United Farmers of
Canada, was “well-intentioned” but was basically anti-labour and patronizing to working girls. The *Woman Worker* did print a reply from the farm women, which argued that the Local Council was its “only contact with urban women” and assuring *The Woman Worker* that farm women still had “independence of action.” But Custance made sure that she had the last word, once again counselling the dangers of alliances with privileged middle-class feminists unaware of the daily realities of exploitation suffered by farm and working women.

**The Women’s Labor Leagues**

As the WLLs were slowly influenced by the Comintern Congress of 1928, their opposition to women’s reform groups sharpened. Until 1930, however, and the immersion of the Labor Leagues in the Workers Unity League, the WLLs comprised a unique experiment in Canadian Communist history. Although generally controlled by the party, they constituted an organization separate in name and identity from the CPC, with a membership that went beyond party members and a structure that allowed a degree of local autonomy. When the Federation of WLLs was founded in 1924 it was far from assured that the leagues would prosper. Custance’s task was not an easy one: she depended on local party officials for organizational aid, and few district functionaries had the time or inclination to organize Women’s Labor Leagues. In 1924, Custance later noted, there was pessimistic speculation about the WLLs’ future, and for two years they made slow progress, gaining little support from “our men in the labour movement.” The leagues’ failure to gain affiliation to the TLC probably made them even less important in the eyes of many Communist labour leaders.

Despite this apathy and pessimism, the WLLs expanded from ten to thirty-seven in 1927 and, according to the *The Woman Worker*, to sixty in 1929. This expansion can be attributed in large part to Custance’s organizational skills and hard work, and also to the existence of a stimulating and provocative women’s newspaper, for, as Custance noted, *The Woman Worker* sustained and extended the Labor Leagues with its wide selection of fiction, educational material, and the inspirational reports from sister leagues. The highly ethnic character of the Communist movement
also pointed to the essential role that the CPC’s sibling associations, the Finnish Organization of Canada and the Jewish Labor League, played in encouraging WLL activity. As Mary North pointed out, *The Woman Worker* was sold and read concurrently with the Finnish-American equivalent, *Toveritar (Woman Comrade)*. The Finnish leagues, influential because of their sheer numbers, drew on strong traditions of women’s self-organization rooted in the prewar socialist movement. During the 1920s they also had their own organizer, Sanna Kannasto, a socialist orator and writer from the Lakehead area, who had worked as an organizer for the Socialist Party of Canada and Social Democratic Party of Canada. Kannasto, “a small bit of a woman, with piercing eyes” and a “fiery” orator’s tongue, was even viewed with some trepidation by the local WLLers, who saw her militant style as a marked contrast to that of many women, especially the “cool, undemonstrative Finns.” Kannasto did education work for the FOC, even taking in promising young female comrades for intensive study. One such student spent two weeks at Kannasto’s farm, trying to learn public speaking and socialist theory: “A lot of the Theory,” she later quipped, “went right over my head.”

The Finnish leagues critiqued their own failure to break out of their ethnic enclaves, though overall the Finnish and Jewish leagues had closer contact with the Women’s Department than did Ukrainian women, who were primarily tied to ULFTA. Before World War I, few Ukrainian women were full-fledged members of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Party. The Russian Revolution and the founding of ULFTA, however, stimulated new interest in women’s organization, and out of Ukrainian Women’s Committees to Aid Famine Victims in the Soviet Russia grew the first locals of the “Workingwomen’s Section of the Labour-Farmer Temple.” By 1923, there were fourteen such women’s locals, and the following year *Robitnysia* was launched. This women’s paper was edited by male leadership from the ULFTA, who naturally set the political agenda and provided the ideological framework for the discussion of the woman question. Indeed, when it was first established, there were frequent reader complaints that some *Robitnysia* articles were simply reprints from the *Ukrainian Labor News*. *Robitnysia’s* own editors, in turn, muttered that they were expending too many columns teaching uneducated women the most basic questions about how to build a women’s organization. Despite evidence of
paternalistic control, the paper began to gradually provide an outlet for women anxious to express their political views, often for the first time.

All these varieties of Women’s Labor Leagues consisted largely of housewives and were firmly structured around language groups. When directives came from the Comintern in the mid-1920s to “Bolshevize” the party, that is, establish membership around factory rather than language groups, they had little impact on the WLLs. Becky Buhay noted that CPC work among women should be conducted in “purely proletarian circumstances,” perhaps a critical reference to the WLLs’ failure to change their language orientation.49 It was a failure that could only reinforce the CPC leadership’s lack of interest in the WLLs.

Yet the WLLs did serve a necessary purpose: based on a socially acceptable auxiliary model, they answered the needs of women who were less proficient than male party members in English, who were not eligible for trade union membership or welcomed as party cell members. Most Labor Leagues divided their time between self-education and fundraising. They held euchres and bazaars, sponsored May Day dances and anniversary festivals for the Russian Revolution, donating their proceeds to local Communist causes or to organizations like the Canadian Labor Defence League (CLDL), which looked after the legal defence of radical trade unionists and Communists. In fact, the WLLs were encouraged by the CPC to affiliate to the CLDL, perhaps because the CLDL was eager to use the WLLs’ proven fundraising talents. The Saskatoon Ukrainian women’s local, named after Alexandra Kollontai, spent a major portion of its time on basketball events, dances, and raffles, raising as much as $1,000 a year, a substantial sum in the 1920s.50

Also in the auxiliary tradition, the Women’s Labor Leagues initiated summer camps, usually organized along language lines, for Communist youth. Women’s involvement in this work was partly the consequence of housewives’ flexible work schedule during the summer, but it was also linked to the strong identification of women with the maternal task of socializing the youth for the future. “We are growing older,” Robinysia reminded its readers, and we “must replace today’s comrades . . . and where will they come from, if we do not raise them ourselves?”51 This identification of women with maternal roles did circumscribe women’s role in politics, just as the earlier maternal feminism had limited the
parameters of women’s political participation. Nonetheless, youth education was important: the party needed to augment its ranks, and youth camps helped to counter values taught in the public schools with an alternate ideology that could sustain the loyalty of party children, perhaps even draw in new recruits.

Internally, league activities were directed towards their members’ own education: the women spent time reading books, discussing current events, and improving their understanding of socialism. In northern Ontario a travelling library of radical books was circulated among towns, while the Ladysmith branch of the women’s section of the FOC attempted to initiate its own in-house, handwritten newspaper, Kipinä (Sparks). Though the editors sometimes had trouble gathering articles, the women could look on their dilemma with humour; at the next meeting, they once reported, “the Kipinä paper will be read even if it does not have one article in it.”52 The Ladysmith branch also sponsored internal discussions on a wide range of topics. As members carefully sewed crafts to sell at fundraising events, they debated: “Does woman belong at home or in politics?” or, more revealing, “Does the marriage law secure women their livelihood or oppress them as slaves?” In both cases, apparently, the women affirmed the latter proposition.53 Some leagues rotated their officers every three months so that all members could gain leadership experience; others offered oratory lessons to develop the skills of women reluctant to speak in public. By meeting weekly to discuss books, commented one member, “we have been able to develop our own understanding and skills: we are no longer asking our men how we should think.”54 For women living in families where men’s activities and opinions were considered of primary importance, this self-confidence was an achievement.

Although party officials sometimes commended WLL work, they more frequently lamented the leagues’ failure to recruit wage-earning and English-speaking women. At the same time, they were at a loss as to how to change the WLLs, especially when women’s work was not high on their priority list. Party leader Jack McDonald claimed that “for two years, the Central Executive Committee never devoted one meeting to discussion of work among women. The Central Committee gave absolutely no attention to women’s work.”55 Ironically, the large proportion of housewives in the leagues, which so concerned the CPC leadership, contradicted
their stereotype of “housewife conservatism.” Interestingly, although The Woman Worker did echo the fear that housewives were “backward,” it also contained alternative opinions voiced by rank-and-file WLLers. One correspondent pointed out that women’s educational opportunities —“their opportunities to learn the truth — were fewer, and that working-class men, too, were conservative, due to the influence of the press, school, and church.”

A similar response came from some Ukrainian women in reaction to the “porcupinism” debate that raged in the pages of Robitnysia in the late 1920s. The term “porcupinism” was taken from the name of an author, Tymko Izhak, who penned a fierce diatribe in the paper against women’s organizations, claiming that women, who were weak, un-intellectual, and unproductive in the economy, should simply concentrate on being “man’s helper.” Porcupinism, an apt synonym for male chauvinism, was actually endorsed by many letters from self-confessed porcupines, which the editors chose not to print, indicating how entrenched stereotypes of female backwardness were in some sections of the party. The article, however, was likely composed deliberately to provoke women’s opposition, and it did just that. Women readers responded in anger to Izhak’s accusations. One group of letters accepted the label of female backwardness, but then tried to turn it to advantage, to argue for women’s release from their isolated, domestic imprisonment. It was precisely because women were so behind ideologically, they said, that they needed to become active in their own organization and thus “develop confidence and enlighten themselves.” “To be in the same organization as men,” wrote another, “would be again to subordinate our thoughts and wishes to men.”

Women readers were even more critical of Izhak’s claim that women’s work was unproductive. They provided long lists of women’s crucial labour to the family; “at the end of the day,” concluded one miner’s wife, “you, my husband have worked your shift and for this you have your pay, but you, woman, where is your pay?”

These Ukrainian women, like the WLL correspondents, were attempting to express their female experience of the world within a class perspective. Although Robitnysia and The Woman Worker never deviated from an overall emphasis on class struggle, they did provide a forum for the voices of working-class women who felt they were accorded an inferior status,
treated “like toys or slaves” by their men folk. Some even implied that women were the scapegoats for class and patriarchal relations: “women are forced into an authority relationship with husbands who have grown to think they are the bosses in the home, and boss wives, as bosses boss them.” Florence Custance offered some sympathy for women suffering within marriage, but she immediately counselled them not to misdirect their anger against men. In the long term, she tried to show, “there are no easy cures for sexual inequality in marriage . . . we must see the basic causes of inequality . . . [capitalism] . . . . Thus, if women want more than a truce, if they want true freedom, the struggle against capitalism must take precedence.”

Social issues like prostitution and alcoholism were also presented within a class analysis, yet with some reference to the immediate suffering of women. Very occasionally, writers in The Woman Worker would refer to the white slave trade as “an outlet for male licentiousness.” More often, though, editorials attributed prostitution to poverty and low wages. Similarly, alcoholism was often portrayed as a consequence of the alienating capitalist work world, although its tragic effects on working-class households, and especially on women, were noted. In Robitnysia, some references were even made to wife battering, a phenomenon middle-class reformers had usually linked to alcoholism but the left-wing press rarely mentioned. There was not complete consistency in readers’ assessments of such issues as alcoholism; but overall, such “moral” issues never assumed the focal position in the WLLs that they had taken in the prewar women’s movement.

Although the Women’s Labor Leagues generally followed the views of the CPC on social and economic issues, they did develop a small measure of autonomy, just as recommendations of the International Women’s Secretariat were modified to fit Canadian conditions. In the coal-mining districts of the Crowsnest Pass, WLLs existed in close alliance with the Communist-dominated Mine Workers Union of Canada (MWUC). Wives and daughters of miners made up the bulk of Labor League membership, for, as Mary North pointed out, “naturally . . . we are housewives for jobs here are only in mining and are hardly even accessible to the man.” The Crowsnest leagues concentrated on building an auxiliary to the MWUC and, for a while, on raising money for the Labour Party of Alberta.
numerous social and fundraising endeavours cited in *The Woman Worker* had political as well as financial importance, for union picnics and May Day dances were crucial stimulants to Communist solidarity; the atmosphere created by the women provided a social glue that helped to cement and sustain political allegiances.

In the northern Ontario WLLs, members were often the wives of primary resource workers or single domestics drawn in by the Finnish connection. As in the Crowsnest Pass, birth control was not an important public issue, indicating that *The Woman Worker*’s vocal stance on birth control did not reflect the views of all the WLLs. “Our members,” recalled one woman from the Lakehead, “were extremely embarrassed when Sanna Kannasto insisted on talking about sexuality and birth control to the Finnish women’s meetings.” The BC Finnish leagues also pursued activities linked to their ethnic identification; in Vancouver, they organized Finnish domestics, while in Sointula, once a Finnish utopian socialist community, they helped run the local co-operative store. Isolated by the Rockies, the BC WLLs held regional conventions, passing resolutions that were then pressed on the local Labour Party or on civic and provincial governments. Particular local and ethnic concerns were evidenced by calls for legislation permitting civil marriage, a reflection of the anti-church views of the Finnish leagues.

Alberta and northern Ontario WLLs sometimes sponsored regional conventions as well, but this practice was often forgone by the larger urban leagues of Toronto and Montreal, with their higher membership numbers and easier access to the party’s organizational machinery. In Toronto, the WLLs had a major hand in editing *The Woman Worker* and, during Custance’s illness in 1928–29, kept the magazine going. The Toronto leagues were active in union support work but lacked the single-union emphasis of an area like the Crowsnest Pass; they helped with a boycott campaign during a bakers’ strike, as well as a YCL effort to organize York Knitting Mills. In keeping with its urban setting, the Toronto WLLs, like those in Montreal and Regina, spent a large amount of time on the minimum wage campaign, and in Toronto they lobbied for mothers’ clinics. Urban leagues also had greater opportunities to join with other Communist organizations, co-sponsoring rallies and demonstrations, such as the large defence meeting the Montreal WLL held for Sacco and Vanzetti.
The measure of local autonomy enjoyed by the WLLs was in part a consequence of the Women's Department’s flexibility and concern for local conditions. But it was also the result of party indifference and default. Communication problems arising from language differences, geography, and party disorganization were all factors creating the diversity of the league experience. After the 1929 CPC convention, questionnaires were sent out to the Labor Leagues to ascertain their membership and activities; the central office apparently had scanty records of the WLL network. This was partly a result of disarray in the wake of Custance’s unexpected death, as Custance had been compelled to run a “one woman department.” In the final analysis, though, it was also a reflection of the peripheral status of the woman question within the party.

Conclusion

Within the Communist agenda, the woman question remained a secondary priority; nevertheless, its significance had increased since the time of the prewar left. The CPC’s new initiatives in work among women were primarily inspired by the example of Soviet Russia and directives from the Comintern. To Canadian Communists, the impressive transformation of women’s status in Russia implied both the value of the USSR’s strategic suggestions and, if imitated, the possibility of similar successes. The party attempted to build a Marxist and Leninist women’s movement that was firmly rooted in the same political goals as the revolutionary movement, stressing economic issues and the primacy of class-based political action. The Women’s Department focused its agitational efforts at the unique exploitation of women under capitalism, and while some party goals, such as the unionization of women, were never fulfilled, other initiatives, like the minimum wage campaign, were more successful in exposing women’s inequality under capitalism. By the end of the decade, the party had grown, though women still constituted a small minority of the membership, and the WLL members tended to be party wives, not the desired newcomers from the factories.

Although economic issues formed the core of the Communist program, birth control and family life were not ignored, partly because of the impact of Soviet reforms, but also because of the keen interest of
Canadian women in reproductive control and sexual autonomy. In lobbying for mothers’ clinics or in doing their auxiliary work, the WLLs were involved in the socialist movement at a different level, and sometimes with a different rationale, than male members. WLLs provided women with a separate space to build their confidence and explore socialist issues from a woman’s perspective. Their auxiliary work gave important support and sustenance to the movement; unfortunately, it also kept women in a sex-stereotyped domestic role that isolated them from power and perpetuated women’s secondary status in the party. With the notable exception of Florence Custance, and later Becky Buhay and Annie Buller, women were not represented in the Communist Party’s seats of power. In fact, if only one family member could buy a party card, it was to the “head of the household.” As one comrade remembers, “Woman’s place was in the home. It’s all right to organize women, men would say, but not my wife! So, when it came to going to a meeting, the men would go. It was more important. The men were the ‘brains.’ The women were in the kitchen. But they still supported so many causes.”

At the same time, domesticity was used as a radicalizing tool: demands for bread and peace were rallying cries used to mobilize women in their socially accepted roles as wives and mothers. Because Communists largely adopted the ideal of a family wage, women’s political consciousness was interpreted in the context of their domestic activities. Women’s domesticity, of course, was a double-edged sword. It might lead women to radical politics; but it was also perceived as the cause of their conservatism. Though it is true that women were less likely to join the party, their “reactionary” mentality did not keep them tied to the kitchen, as the “porcupines” claimed. Women’s leap into sustained political activity was precluded by illiteracy, material impoverishment, family responsibilities, the unwelcoming attitudes of male party members, and the same anti-socialist pressures that kept working-class men from joining the party. Moreover, women may have been radicalized on issues like birth control, while men were drawn in by trade union concerns. However, the party’s peripheral interest in such women’s issues as reproductive control — a direct consequence of the CPC’s brand of Marxist-Leninism, as well as persisting patriarchal prejudices — inevitably gave men’s issues the weight of prestige and importance within the party.
Although woman’s role in the family was seen as crucial to her political understanding, it was not analyzed as critically as her role in production, nor was it judged to be central to her oppression. While the problems of working-class housewives were sympathetically explored, in the final analysis, women’s maternal role was accepted, even sentimentalized. The Woman Worker did not embrace a dogmatic economism that rejected all issues of women’s sexual subordination; but the solution to sexual oppression was always seen in class terms. This emphasis on the necessity of revolutionary working-class solidarity would soon become of paramount importance to the organization of women during the next period of the CPC’s evolution.

Notes


4 Although the WLLs were technically expelled because of a constitutional amendment, anticommunism was the most important force behind their expulsion. See the Toronto Star, 4 November 1927; The Woman Worker, December 1927.


6 The Worker, 1 May 1922.

7 Ibid., 13 June 1925.

8 The Woman Worker, July 1926.


12 University of Toronto Rare Books Room (hereafter U of T), Kenny Collection, Box 3, “Our Tasks Among Women,” Central Executive Committee Report, Fifth Convention, 1925, 64.

13 *Imprecorr*, 4, 71 (6 October 1924); ibid., 6, 69 (26 October 1926).


15 Reprinted in *The Worker*, 15 November 1925.

16 U of T, Kenny Collection, “Our Tasks Among Women,” 64.


18 *Vapaus*, 22 November 1933. *Vapaus* charged that a “heavenly agent [i.e., a Lutheran minister] was hovering about unemployed maids,” taking advantage of their economic desperation by acting as an employment agent but finding them low-paid jobs.

19 U of T, Kenny Collection, “Our Tasks Among Women,” 64.

20 *PAC*, FOC Collection, “Program and Constitution of the Canadian Federation of Women’s Labor Leagues.”

21 *The Worker*, 1 May 1922.

22 Dorothy Smith, *Feminism and Marxism* (Vancouver, 1974), 4.

23 Becky Buhay and unknown party member, quoted in Donald Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners* (Toronto, 1979), 127.

24 *The Worker*, 1 May 1922.

25 Custance was prevented from running because she could not fulfill the property qualification.


27 *The Worker*, 7 November 1925.

28 Ibid., 21 March 1925.

29 On the Left and birth control, see Angus McLaren, “What Has This to Do with Working-Class Women? Birth Control and the Canadian Left, 1900–1939,” *Social*

30 The Worker, 20 June 1925.

31 The Woman Worker, July 1926.

32 Ibid., September 1927. The rationale that fewer births would produce “better children” remained popular in the interwar period among feminist and medical proponents of birth control. See Linda Gordon, Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America (New York, 1974), chap. 10.

33 The Woman Worker, December 1927.

34 Ibid., April 1928.

35 The Worker, 4 June 1927.

36 Ibid., 2 May 1925 and 2 November 1924.

37 Ibid., 21 March 1925.

38 Buhay’s letters were written during and after trips to Russia in the early 1930s and in the 1950s. See ibid., 30 August and 6 September 1930, for a description of Buhay’s first trip to the Soviet Union, and U of T, Kenny Collection, Box 41, for letters written during her stay in the 1950s.


40 For example, see references to Communists’ personal lives in Lita-Rose Betcherman, The Little Band (Ottawa, 1982): chap. 11. Allen Seager, “Finnish Canadians and the Ontario Miners Movement,” Polyphony 3, no. 2 (Fall 1981): 35–45, also points out how unmarried women could be punished by people outside the Communist movement. After the Hollinger mine disaster of 1928, the company refused to compensate the Finnish widows because they had not been legally married.

41 Robitnysia, 15 December 1925.

42 Vapaus, 9 March 1933.

43 The Woman Worker, April 1927.

44 The Worker, 18 July 1925.

45 The Woman Worker, October 1927.

46 Ibid., February 1928.

47 Ibid., October 1927.
48 Interview with Taime Davis.

49 *The Worker*, 22 August 1925.

50 *The Voice of the Workingwoman* (a precursor to *Robitnysia*), January/February 1922. $1,000 was donated to Soviet famine relief; $328 went to the ULFTA in Saskatoon.

51 *Robitnysia*, 1 April 1924.

52 *PCP, FOC Collection, MG 28 V 46, vol. 4, file 11, Minutes of the Ladysmith’s Finnish Women’s Branch of the Communist Party of Canada, 17 December 1925*.

53 Ibid., 19 February 1925 and 28 May 1925.

54 *The Woman Worker*, February 1927.


56 *The Woman Worker*, September 1927.

57 *Robitnysia*, 1 April 1928.

58 Ibid., 15 May 1928.

59 Ibid., 1 June 1928.

60 *The Woman Worker*, March 1928.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., April 1928.

63 Ibid., December 1927.

64 Ibid., July 1927.

65 Interview with Taime Davis.

66 *PAO, CPC Collection, Report from Sudbury District Executive Committee of the WLLS to Executive Committee of the Federation of WLLS, 5 February 1930*.

67 Interview with Taime Davis.