

## FROM NORTH AMERICA/ Canada

### Rallying for the cause

**The New Brunswick Coastal Women's Group Women makes headway in allying with the women's movement**

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In the first issue of Yemaya, we had explained how, after government cuts to unemployment insurance, a huge protest movement of seasonal workers highly dependent on this type of aid programmes, had developed in the coastal communities of Canada. The movement was led mainly by women. Some of them had organized conferences to help coastal women break their isolation and to provide them with critical information. They had conducted an action research to help develop strategies for action and assist them to meet with decision-makers in order to bring about social changes identified as critical.

Since the publication of that article, many positive things have happened, but keeping women mobilized and sustaining the movement remains our main challenge.

Last winter, women not yet ready for political action, organized a two-day conference using the same model that had been so popular in previous years. Participation was excellent. We had a guest speaker who spoke on family violence and another on positive thinking and relaxation. Of course, we had the usual party and talent show, but we also held a workshop to identify future directions for the group. From the many ideas, two priorities emerged: increase of minimum wage and achievement of pay equity, and improvement of working conditions.

The province of New Brunswick has one of the lowest minimum wage rates in Canada. A full-time worker earning a minimum wage will earn less than what the government has identified as the poverty line. At the same time, men working at identical or similar jobs, earn an average of Can\$2 an hour more than the women. The law is not strong enough to force employers to respect pay equity.

An action plan was developed on the issue of pay equity. Women saw very clearly that they risked losing their jobs if they fought this battle alone. As seasonal workers, their employers do not need to fire them—they simply will not hire them the following year. They have absolutely no protection. Good media coverage surrounding the conference put the concerns of coastal women and the pay equity issue in the spotlight. Women were very nervous with this sudden public attention.

They feared that they would not be recalled to work for the next fishing season which was about to start. Our provincial Minister of Labour, a woman herself, called a meeting and indicated that the government could not investigate employers if women did not file complaints. These female seasonal workers, mainly fish-plant workers, said they would never file complaints for fear of losing their jobs.

It was clear that the women in coastal communities needed to ally themselves with women's organizations that could fight the battle for them. A momentum was created through media coverage. At this time, another group of women was inviting provincial women's organizations to join the World March of Women 2000, the themes of which were Women's Poverty and Violence against Women.

The New Brunswick (NB) committee for the March decided they would focus on the pay equity issue as their main demand. A working group has been set up, which includes women lawyers, and they will draft a pay equity law and present it to government. The President of the World March, Françoise David, has been involved in the struggle to implement a pay equity law in Québec. She was invited by the NB committee to explain the strategies that had been used by them, the main obstacles they had faced, and the traps that should be avoided.

The New Brunswick Coastal Women's Group is enthusiastic about the progress they have accomplished in such a short time. The challenge now is to keep the women mobilized. It is difficult to maintain participation and communication between them and the more urbanized women in the pay equity working group. We not only face the problem of geographic dispersion but also, in some cases, the shyness of these less experienced committee members.

Organizing the World March in various regions of the province will hopefully be a way of bringing women from different backgrounds to work towards a common goal.

Referring ourselves to the criteria to sustain a social movement we had used in the previous article, we can evaluate our progress as follows:

- ◆ The process moves step by step/issue to issue: we have been able to move from the issue of employment insurance to the one focusing on pay equity and working conditions.
- ◆ Purpose and objective are sharpened: we have clearly made progress here.
- ◆ The base is expanded through education: we still have no capacity for this.
- ◆ Facts are researched, studied and documented: not only did we have the action-research report prepared by the women in coastal communities themselves, but we also developed linkages with professionals able to work on the issue of pay equity.
- ◆ Links are built with supportive allies: this is the area where we have been the most successful. The World March of Women 2000 committee, which represents many women's groups, has taken our pay equity issue very seriously.
- ◆ Members are kept involved: this is still difficult to achieve. The World March may be a good way to keep the women in coastal communities involved.
- ◆ People speak for themselves, and develop diverse leadership: a lot of progress has been made here. The women have done very well in articulating their demands, not only with the media but with other women's organizations. They see that so far nothing harmful has happened to them but the fear of losing their jobs is still in the background.
- ◆ Structures are developed—useful to guide and stabilize the movement, but caution is required since structures can also kill it: we still have no formal structures, and we still don't know if these would have helped or harmed us.

We realize we have made important progress in different areas but we still do not have a social movement able to bring about social changes. Indeed, we are lacking in some of the essential conditions, all of which are necessary to achieve a sustainable social movement.

Nevertheless, the New Brunswick Coastal Women

Group is very proud of its achievements. We have been able to make significant progress in drawing other women's groups to support our demands. This has increased the awareness of urban middle class women to the living conditions and working realities of women from coastal areas. At this time, our leaders are encouraged to continue but they are tired and realize the importance of involving more women. This will be our challenge for the coming year.