

**Panel on the Economy – May 2009**  
**Sam Gindin, Leo Paanich and Marion Pollack**

Speakers Notes – Marion Pollack (CUPW)

I don't think we can refer to this as a singular crisis. I believe the time we are in is a convergence of four different crisis –some newer and some older, and in order to develop a response we need to understand that this is not a single crisis but the times we are facing is a combination or convergence of the following crisis:

- an environmental crises
- a crises of equality
- a crises of hope
- an economic crises

I strongly believe that we need to analyze these four crises in order to develop a prescriptive response. If we just look at it as an economic crisis we will be developing responses which don't engage a broad cross section of people.

I will go through each of these crises. They are in no particular order of priority.

**Environmental Crises**

There is no question that we are facing a serious environmental crisis. We have to move quickly to reduce the amount of carbon we are emitting into the atmosphere. This reduction has to be fairly substantial.

Some scientists are saying that we have only ten years to act in order to ensure that there is real effective climate justice.

This perspective alters how we look at the world and is critical in developing a prescriptive response. The atmosphere knows no borders. Hence our response to the crises needs to be local, regional, national and global.

The effects of climate change impact people differentially. In Canada and Quebec the people who are most vulnerable to climate change include:

- Inuit and aboriginal people
- Workers
- Resource dependent communities
- Poor people

This differential impact also applies in the South.

Working for climate justice is incredibly difficult – it challenges the way we work together, the way we organize, for the labour movement it creates its own unique set of challenges as often jobs are counterpoised with the environment.

Many people have talked about a green retrofit or the creation of green jobs as a way to address these crises. I think that is an important avenue, but when we talk about jobs creation we need to be very clear we need to talk about job creation that is also targeted to:

- women
- youth
- racialized workers
- Aboriginal people
- workers with disabilities
- lgbt workers

I am not familiar enough with these issues to outline a prescription. But, what I do know is very clearly if we don't address the environmental crisis as part of our response to the economic crisis, we will be putting forward solutions that are inadequate and do not address the real nature of the crises and also will not engage people. The reality whether it is green washing or not, is that many people are individually trying to take steps to reduce their environmental footprints. We need to tap into the sense that people want to make the world a better place.

### **The Crisis of Equality**

This is hardly a new crisis. Women have been arguing about inequality for eons.

Increasingly, we have seen social movements globally raise the issues of race, Aboriginal status, disability, sexuality geography, and trans issues.

When we look at the economic or any other crises we need to apply an intersectional framework.

I am personally irked that many analyses of the economic crises don't specifically look at the situation of women. But I am not expecting people to change their perspective or analysis so they won't irk me. I am arguing that people need to change their analysis in order to build a more inclusive movement. Quite frankly, if you don't recognize and talk about how women and racialized groups are being affected by this crises then your are building an analysis I am not interested in; in a movement that reproduces the same problems that have led to the failure of many left and union initiatives.

### ***Women and the economic crises***

In this economic crisis currently the majority of people being affected are people in the non precarious and often highly unionized sectors of the economy. We have just heard Brother Gindin talk about the auto industry and it would be foolish to say that women are not affected as workers in these layoffs.

But, in this crisis women in precarious jobs have been less hit by layoffs than men in full time full year jobs. This may be because the public sector and health care, education, and social services have already suffered huge cutbacks or because the effects of the crises have not fully hit us.

So, we are seeing a differential type of job loss. Jobs where women are concentrated in are not suffering the same type of job loss as men. But the jobs where women are concentrated in are still often jobs that pay less than men's, are still insecure and often lack benefits and pensions.

But it is not only women who are concentrated in precarious jobs. Racialized and Aboriginal workers are very likely to be in low status, precarious jobs.

Many men will find their way back to employment through precarious jobs including through temporary agencies.

I am very concerned about the growth of temporary agencies. Here are some facts and figures:

- The federal government is increasing their use of temporary workers. Last year it is estimated they spent almost 3 billion dollars on temporary agencies
- A women's training organization in Ontario estimates that there is at least 1/3 of Ontario's workers engaged in temporary work
- Many women are temporary workers, especially those who are racialized, immigrants or young. In 2004, 14% of Canadian women worked temporarily, compared with 12% of men. Women are almost twice as likely as men to be part-time temporary workers.\*
- A temporary worker makes on average, \$4 less an hour than a permanent full-time worker. A part-time temporary worker makes \$11 less an hour.

This makes fighting for higher minimum wages, for living wages, for reasonable employment standards for temporary workers critical responses to the economic crises.

We can't just talk about infrastructure spending etc. we need to talk about how to improve the lives of temporary and precarious workers. And we need to talk about who is getting the jobs and who is not.

### ***The household***

The economic crisis will have a huge impact on the household,

Currently Unpaid work is still a major contribution that women make to the economy. In Canada unpaid work is estimated to be worth 41% of [GDP](#); most unpaid work in Canada and around the world is still

performed by women. The economic crises will increase the unpaid work that women do. There will be less money to pay for help, restaurant meals, eldercare, etc. The burden will fall to women. This will put an increased load on women activists and we will need to find ways to allow for women's participation knowing that a number of women will be juggling increased loads

And we need to address that in our responses – we need to look at more social services but delivered in unique and different ways – maybe more community kitchens etc.

One of the worst effects of crises is an increase in violence against women

- A 2004 study by the U.S. Department of Justice found “a strong link between intimate violence and the economic well-being of couples and the communities in which they live.”
- Women's shelters across are starting to see financial woes spilling over into violence, as reports of domestic abuse rise.
- The Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter saw one of the largest jumps, with the number of phone calls to its helpline tripling in February, compared to the year before.
- Oshawa, which has experienced a heavy round of layoffs in male-dominated industries such as the auto industry, is reporting a 24 per cent increase in cases of violence against women in the fourth quarter of 2008 versus 2007.
- We cannot talk about the effects of the economic crises without mentioning violence against women and strains on the family.

If we don't talk about the need of a strong social safety net that particularly responds to the need of women and children as part of the economic crises we making a big mistake. We are building a world where the realities of women don't fully exist. We also need to talk to men about their responsibilities in preventing violence.

And we are talking about expanding and improving the EI programme. And, while I hate using the US as a positive comparison in any way I need to note that many American states provide EI to survivors of domestic violence. Why cannot we make that demand here in this context?

## ***EI***

I want to point out that there are substantial differences between the access of men and women to EI.

- There is no question our EI program leaves far too many Canadians, especially women and lower wage, insecure workers, out in the cold. In November 2008, just four in 10 unemployed workers qualified for benefits..
- EI program rules exclude or unfairly penalize women because they fail to take into proper account the different working patterns of women compared to men. While the great majority of adult women now engage in paid work, the hours they work (as part time or temporary) exclude many from EI benefits, as do periods of time spent away from work caring for children or others.
- As Monica Townson and Kevin Hayes documented in a study originally conducted for the Status of Women Canada, only 32% of unemployed women qualified for regular EI benefits in recent years compared to 40% of men who were unemployed. Over 70% of women and 80% of men qualified for benefits before the cuts were imposed in the early 1990s. The gender gap in terms of the proportion of unemployed women and men collecting regular benefits has closed a bit, but was still two percentage points in November 2008 (40% vs. 38%). The gap is much bigger when it comes to average benefits. In 2006-07, the average benefit for women was \$298 per week compared to \$360 for men. Women also qualify for shorter periods on average and, in 2005-06, 30% of women exhausted regular benefits compared to 26% of men. Only about one-third of the total dollar amount of regular EI (unemployment) benefits is paid to women, even though women now participate in the paid workforce at almost the same rate as men.
- Looking at the gendered differences in terms of access to EI is important, not only because we need to address inequality, but also because increasingly men are going to find jobs in the precarious areas where women and racialized persons have historically worked .

- Therefore to talk about just improving the EI system without looking at it with a gendered lens it to eliminate the reality that of the different impacts.

### **Social assistance**

I have not had time to research this issue, so my comments on social assistance are brief.

It is important to note, that women are often more reliant on social services than men, due to their roles in the family, so any change to social services has a harsher impact on women, then it has on men. Women workers are also highly concentrated as providers of social services. Any change or cut back to the delivery of social services also has an adverse impact on women workers.

We need to work towards better social assistance, easier eligibility rules, and better access to training.

### **Pensions**

As someone who is planning to retire from Canada Post with a full pension, I sympathize with the autoworkers who are facing huge threats to their pensions. I would not know what do to do if my pension was cut.

At the same time, I have read a study from the CLC which shows that over 60% of working women in Canada don't have workplace pensions.

So we have a problem. On the one hand the CAW is rightfully arguing that the Government of Ontario has a "moral and legal responsibility" to protect pensions affected by a potential bankruptcy at General Motors Canada or Chrysler. But on the other hand many many people primarily women and racialized workers don't have pensions. Only 38.5% of Canadian workers have workplace pensions. We are asking the government to spend tax dollars on workers who already have way more benefits. We have to recognize this contradiction.

The CLC is calling for a national pension insurance fund for workers like me who have defined benefits pension funds in the event that our companies go belly up and for a doubling of pension payout. That is great but it does not address the tension between workers who have pensions and the vast majority who don't. In terms of increasing the payout it is important but we need to keep the following statistic in mind -

- In 2004, the average CPP benefit paid to women aged 65 – 69 was \$335/mo. (58% of that for men who received on average \$578).

I can't address equity without pointing out that these crises have different impacts in the global north and the global south.

While the north is reeling from the crises there are huge effects in the south and this is especially true for women.

We need a response of International Solidarity. This can be done in many ways.

For example CUPW knows that one of the many ways in which postal administrations throughout the world are responding to the economic crises is by engaging in widespread technological change. As a result we are hosting an international conference for postal unions on new technology.

We need to learn from workers in France, and we need to actively oppose the Canada Colombia free trade agreement and we need to look at how the solutions we propose impact workers in the south.

### **Crises of Hope**

In the last federal election less than 50% of people voted. Now I admit that this was not the most exciting election and the alternatives were not clear but that number is disturbing. In the recent provincial election in BC the voter turnout was similarly low.

And while we are seeing some mobilizations against the crises, and the CLC has rallies planned across the country the turnouts to these are not overwhelmingly.

People are not substituting extra parliamentary action for voting.

There is amazing organizing going on in local communities, and sub sections of these communities but unfortunately these actions are often small and localized.

To me this adds up to a feeling of hopelessness in many people.

And I think that as the left we need to acknowledge this and deal with it.

I am not a big touchy feely huggy person, and I am not suggesting that we start meetings by sharing our feelings.

But, I am strongly saying that if we don't address peoples emotions, their need to feel involved, listened to and included, we are not going to be building a strong sustainable movement. So not only do we have to look at expanding our demands we have to look at how we organize and develop new methods to organize. Some groups are doing amazing work and we need to look at what they have done and learn from them.

## **Conclusion**

We need to fight back but we need to fight back in new and creative ways that talk about equality, and build a movement where the three people speaking here today are not all white, and where we respect differences and where we know that inclusion means way way more than a paragraph on women, or a couple of sentences on equality.

I want to thank the socialist project for inviting me –even though I have been scared about it for the past two weeks. I have been forced to think and that is a wonderful gift.

**\* Note added** – on the issue of social assistance, there is much to say about the importance of public services and social

assistance in creating an economy of and for the people. We hear all too often about deficits and “too much government” when it comes to quality of life issues. Corporations and the governments, who support them, would like us to think that quality public services and a strong, viable, social safety net are too costly and bad for business. But this is not fact. It is a political position; an ideology of neoliberalism and capitalism that keeps the employer strong and weakens workers and their families. So we leave you with this question; **how come we can suddenly come up with billions and billions of dollars to keep the current (flawed) system afloat, but when it comes to systems that support our communities and our families, there is always (in good times or bad), an overwhelming fixation with debt, deficit and cost**