

CAW Policy Statement on the Family

WHY A FAMILY POLICY?

Life does not stop at the plant gate or the office door. Working people are citizens, community members, and, most immediately, family members. Through their unions, workers have struggled to make progress to improve their lives, both in and out of the workplace, for themselves and their families.

THE CHANGING FAMILY

Rapid social changes, especially over the last 30 years, have transformed the very nature of the family. While for many, the term "family" still means a father and stay-at-home mother with two children, for most workers the family is now something different.

- In 1961, 65 per cent of Canadian families conformed to the traditional model of a male breadwinner and an at-home spouse with children.
- In 1987, only 24 per cent of Canadian families conformed to that model.
- 63.8 per cent of single mothers with children under 16 are in the workforce, and about 85 per cent of those work full-time.
- 68 per cent of two-parent families in Canada with children under five years of age are dual income families.
- 16 per cent of two-income families would fall below the poverty line if only the "head" of the household had paid work.
- The poverty rate for Canadian children under 16 is 17.6 per cent (Nfld. 26.8 per cent).

We live in a time of change. It is also a time of stress and insecurity because our social structures and support systems have failed to keep pace.

Daily life for many families often includes the tremendous stress of juggling schedules as two or more people work outside the home, with little time for household work, concern about inadequate childcare, and less time to enjoy friends and family. Ironically for many, the burden of financial insecurity remains.

THE NEO-CONSERVATIVE AGENDA

Neo-conservative governments in the U.S., Britain and elsewhere have tried to capitalize on the insecurity of the times by promising a return to "traditional values". Ironically these pro-business policies have meant more freedom for business, but fewer choices for working people.

The U.S. has one of the highest infant mortality rates among industrialized countries. Some 13 million U.S. children live in poverty. Less than one in five workers has union representation.

In Britain the privatization of services like health care, telecommunications and sanitation has meant less service at a higher price. Where the rich can afford their own private service, such as health care, the remaining public service offers only the barest minimum.

In Canada, native people have two to four times the average rate of death, illness and accidents because of a lower standard of living and reduced access to health services. People at the lower end of the income scale are hit hardest when costs go up and services like health care and education are eroded.

As the income gap between rich and poor widens, as services like health care and education are eroded, working people feel tremendous economic insecurity. Much of the next generation has already been condemned to poverty. Making progress is even harder when civil liberties and union rights are weakened.

UNIONS AND FAMILIES

Workers have struggled through their unions to gain more security and control in their lives. We have made great progress by placing limits on the rights of corporations by negotiating everything from wages and benefits, to scheduling, transfers, layoffs and recall, grievance procedures and health and safety.

We have also won protection like medical and dental plans, and pensions so that neither we, nor our families, are impoverished by ill health or old age. We have protected jobs and income, with seniority provisions, transfer rights and severance provisions, to keep a measure of security even in uncertain times.

We negotiated paid time off the job like holidays, vacations, and 30-and-out to enjoy time away from work with family and friends. The CAW break through on indexed pensions in 1987 means that workers can retire with economic security for the future without fear of inflation eating away at their income.

Innovative negotiated programs like union counselling and legal services plans help CAW members and their families get the help they need to deal with personal problems.

Pressure for other progressive changes in family policy can only increase. There is urgent need to eliminate poverty among children. Unions cannot do this in isolation, but will need to work with a political coalition of progressive groups to improve life for Canadian families.

Meanwhile unions continue to find practical solutions to changing needs. Collective bargaining and legislative goals now address family leaves, quality childcare services, care for the elderly, support for the disabled and the right to a workplace free of harassment.

Encouraging the full and fair participation women in society means supporting a woman's right to reproductive choice, as well as continuing to struggle for programs like affirmative action and pay equity.

The key is for people to have choices to make the best decisions for themselves and their family. With the necessary financial and social supports, people are neither condemned to poverty nor denied a measure of control over their lives.

WORKING PEOPLE AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

We don't live in isolation. To improve life in our communities, we extend our health and safety activities in the workplace to the fight for a safer environment. We back up our efforts to improve social programs by actively supporting the United Way. We struggle to make our cities and towns liveable with initiatives like co-op housing and better community services.

We play an active role on school boards and city councils. We organize and coach children's sports and other recreational activities.

As part of the international community, we promote solidarity with workers in other countries. We support their struggle for a living wage and decent working conditions for their benefit, and for our economic security.

Our fate is closely linked to world events. We struggle for world peace because we know our families and our communities are not safe when faced with the threat of nuclear war.

THE CAW FAMILY

The labour movement has long used the language of the family. Words like "Brother" and "Sister" evoke a certain closeness, generosity and commitment to others.

The union fosters solidarity and fights for working people and their families. It is also a social and cultural institution that encourages the early days with the women's auxiliaries and their crucial strike support and community work.

Over the years the union has encouraged more family involvement through activities like the CAW Family Education Program. The newly-reconstructed CAW Family Education Centre, with a childcare centre and recreational facilities, places renewed emphasis on family participation.

Good family policy is an ongoing need. We have already made great progress. However in the coming years the pressure for progressive change will increase. The health and well-being of our families depends on it, and they deserve no less.