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Elizabeth Quinlan

Andrea Quinlan

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**Textually Mediated Labour Activism:  
An Examination of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Canadian Mine Mill & Smelter Workers  
Union, 1940s-1960s**

By Elizabeth Quinlan<sup>1</sup> and Andrea Quinlan<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract**

This paper examines the activism of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Union – Canada (MMSW) in the 1940s and 1950s. Drawing on Institutional Ethnography (IE), this paper examines the work of individual MMSW Auxiliary locals across Canada and the ways in which localized political action was coordinated through texts. The paper focuses on how Ladies Auxiliary locals activated two kinds of texts, the MMSW Ladies Auxiliary (LA) Constitution and the district and national Auxiliary newsletters, and examines how these texts coordinated Ladies Auxiliary members' union work. The paper reveals the political organizing efforts of the LA women within their own locals, the MMSW union, and in broader political movements. In doing so, this paper challenges the prevailing notion that Auxiliaries merely served their male union counterparts in times of labour disputes.

*Key Words:* Canadian Mining Union Auxiliaries, Historical Institutional Ethnography, Union Activism

**Introduction**

The image of the wife standing behind her husband and his job was a prominent theme in trade union materials in the 1940s through to the 1960s. Archival materials suggest that many men welcomed women's help during strikes, but held the implicit assumption that they would resume their posts in the kitchen and laundry rooms when the strike was over. A 'good union girl' worked to support her family, used makeup moderately, kept her stocking seams straight, and went out on the picket line with her man because having "girls come on the line...puts more pep in the gas" (Strom, 1983, p. 371). In the fullness of time, it has become clear that not all women conformed to that image. One such group of women – a Ladies' Auxiliary of a Canadian mining union in the 1940s and 1950s – is the subject of this paper. The case study brings contemporary feminist methodological tools to the questions, what work did Ladies Auxiliary of the Canadian mining unions do and how was this work coordinated?

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Quinlan holds a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies. She teaches and researches in the areas of sociology of gender, health, and work in the Department of Sociology, University of Saskatchewan with associate status in the Women's and Gender Studies Program. Her research examines physical, psychological, and social health in terms of the gendered relations enacted through formal and informal caregiving, while shedding light on the historical fluidity of gendered definitions of caregiving.

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Quinlan is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at Cornell University. Her areas of interest include feminist methodologies and histories of activism. Her current research examines histories of feminist activism around forensic technologies for sexual assault investigation and prosecution.

Labour histories of the 1970s and 1980s explored the relationship women as workers have to trade unions and highlighted women's distinctive culture and organizational forms and tactics, but little attention has been given to women's non-waged involvement in trade unions (Sangster, 2000). The study contributes to a small body of feminist labour history by examining the non-waged women's work associated with the formation and development of the Canadian trade union movement. We first provide a summation of the relevant literature, a description of the study's methodology, and a background to the particular auxiliary before moving to the thematically organized findings and then offering conclusions.

### **Women's Unpaid Work in the Trade Union Movement: Contested Terrain**

Feminist scholars have long since located 'women's' unpaid work within the broad frame of reproductive labour and the social construction of care (Hochschild, 1983; Graham, 1983). Early feminist writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries elevated women's work by pointing to its necessity for the improvement of the human race through developments in hygiene, education, and nutrition and by advocating for appropriate training and compensation for those performing the specialized care functions (Gilman, 1898). More recent feminist scholarship has located women's work within an 'ethic of care' framework (Noddings, 2010, 2003; Nortvedt & Helge, 2010; Tronto, 1993; Gilligan, 1982). The unpaid work of women in auxiliaries associated with men's trade unions is rarely considered in this body of literature. Yet, ladies auxiliaries (LAs) existed since the end of the nineteenth century in many of the skilled trade unions in industries where few women were employed, including the International Association of Machinists, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters' Women's Economic Council, Carpenters, Milk Drivers, Mail Carriers, and Motion Picture Operators (Chateauvert, 1998; Levine, 1991). Most of these Auxiliaries were comprised of wives, daughters, mothers, sisters, and widows of the male union members.

The literature on auxiliaries is limited. As Levine (1991) notes, they are not mentioned in most union histories and the few that do dismiss them in a sentence or two. Within the limited literature, the nature of the auxiliary work and their political nature are debated. Some authors, such as Strom (1983) and Lasky (1984) suggest that Auxiliary women were constrained by conventional roles and traditional gender arrangements, and that the "the auxiliary model was a poor vehicle for feminist critique" (Merithew, 2006, p. 64). Chateauvert (1998) in her work on the sleeping car porters Auxiliary, argues the opposite. In her examination of the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners in the United States in early 1930s, Merithew (2006) found that the Auxiliary openly confronted male leaders with newer forms of protest that drew on an enlarged understanding of women's position in the movement.

The women of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Mine Mill and Smelter Workers (MMSW), examined in this paper, in all likelihood, did not consider themselves, or their work, invisible. Neither were they troubled by the question of whether their work was political or personal. That binary has only recently become of interest, an interest largely limited to feminist scholars and has been problematized along with other binaries such as re/productive labour, public/private, and personal/political. Guildford & Morton argue that "'separate spheres' is an ideology, and often a contradictory one, obscuring the overlapping relations of women's private and public lives" (as cited in Sangster, 1994, p. 130). Moreover, the over-generalized, pre-specified gender categories have been detrimental to the development of a full appreciation of women's work

experience (Siltanen, 1994). This paper will show that the Mine Mill and Smelter Workers' Auxiliary work was located in both the private world of family, nurturing, and community and in the public domain of the economy, resource production, and the paid labour market.

## **Methodology**

Institutional ethnography (IE) is an established feminist methodology for investigating processes of social organization. Developed by Canadian feminist, Dorothy Smith (2005), IE creatively combines critical Marxism with the postmodern sensibilities of discourse analysis. IE's ontology is materialist in the sense that social organization is explored through the actual practices of individuals and the interaction of those practices with material objects, particularly texts. IE begins with an individual's experience, while simultaneously bringing into focus relations that are not particular to that individual, "relations that reach beyond and coordinate what she or he is doing" (Smith, 2005, p. 41). Attending to both of these levels of analysis is what distinguishes IE from its ethnographic cousins (Campbell & Gregor, 2004).

Texts in IE are understood to be visible traces of institutionalised social relations. Replicable texts, those written, drawn, or otherwise reproducible, have the capacity to coordinate social action (Smith, 2005). A fundamental aspect of people's work is 'activating' texts, which "involves anchoring the text into the local realities" (Smith, 1990). Since its development, IE has been applied to many different subjects: health care (Diamond, 2006; Rankin, 2003; Mykhavlovskiy, 2001), town planning (Turner, 2001), and institutional responses to domestic violence (Pence, 2001) and sexual assault (Quinlan & Quinlan, 2010). The subjects taken up in existing IE studies are contemporary social problems. This paper deviates from this trend in IE scholarship by taking up a historical subject matter and examining historical texts and their role in coordinating and activating union work.

In this paper, we focus on two forms of texts that were central in coordinating the Ladies Auxiliary's work: Ladies Auxiliary national newsletters and the MMSW Ladies Auxiliary Constitution. We consider how the Constitution acted as mandating texts that coordinated action between Auxiliary locals across Canada and we take the newsletters to be texts that reveal some of the daily work of the Auxiliaries. In examining these two types of texts – a constitution and newsletters – we explore how the Ladies Auxiliary Constitution were 'activated' through the daily work of the Auxiliary. The texts were collected from seven archives across Canada—four university or college archives, two provincial archives, and the RCMP files at the National Archives of Canada.

## **Background on the MMSW Auxiliary**

Along with other left-led unions in Canada, MMSW upheld the post-war vision of progress through labour unity and its active pursuit of broader social goals (Finkel, 2008). It was successful in securing gains for its members at the bargaining table and animating its internal culture with their belief in the fairness and justice of an egalitarian society. Historians agree that MMSW was one of the most democratically constituted unions in North America (Tester, 1982; Verzuh, 2012). MMSW was one of the few unions in which the organizing of women into auxiliaries was considered by the leadership to be crucial to the union's success, exemplified by its slogan "a union without women is only half organized" (Mercier, 2008; Buse & Steedman, 1994, p. 201).

Although an international union, MMSW had several very large Canadian locals in the 1940s and 1950s in Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec. In the Sudbury local alone, MMSW organized close to 18,000 in the mines and smelters of International Nickel Company (INCO) and Falconbridge. By the mid-1950s, the Canadian MMSW had 35,000 members (Solski and Smaller, 1984) and 120,000 in the fifty locals in both Canada and the United States (Mercier, 2008). One of the largest local auxiliaries, LA #131, was established in Sudbury in 1944, with an eventual membership of approximately 300 members. By 1946, there were twenty-five Canadian LA locals in BC, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec undertaking political activities that sufficiently threatened the status quo for the RCMP to keep them under surveillance for decades (Steedman, 2000).

Auxiliaries in Canada were governed by the National Executive of the Union with the National Chairman acting as liaison between the Executive and the Auxiliaries and District representatives. Auxiliary membership was tied to Union membership: the women lost their membership when their male counterparts lost their union membership. If their male relatives became unemployed, Auxiliary members were exempt from paying their dues. The demographic profile of the Auxiliary membership matched the MMSW membership: both were dominated by recent immigrants to Canada from Scandinavian and Eastern European countries and Francophones from Quebec. While there is some evidence of tensions between the various ethnic sub-groups, for the purposes of this paper, we do not focus on the divisions within the Auxiliaries, but instead, on their collective sensibilities and activities.

## **Findings**

In this section, we consider the work of the MMSW LA as “activating” texts and anchoring them in local contexts, as prescribed by the study’s methodology (Smith, 2005, p. 105), in order to answer the research questions regarding the work of a Canadian auxiliary. The section is organized thematically in accordance with the ways in which the mandating text is anchored in local contexts, as reflected in the newsletters. We first provide a discussion of the texts before moving to the six themes.

### *Texts*

The institutional text mandating Auxiliary work in Canada is the LA Constitution, adopted in 1955 at the same time the Canadian MMSW established its autonomy from the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers (IUMMSW) and shortly thereafter was merged with the MMSW (Canada) Constitution (Ladies’ Auxiliaries of the National Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers of Canada, 1955). The content remained the same for at least 20 years, barring a few amendments at annual conventions during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The preamble Auxiliary’s Constitution reflects a Marxist understanding of the role of trade unions in the larger class struggle, with assertions such as, “we hold that there is a class struggle in Society, and that this struggle is caused by economic conditions” and “an injury to one is an injury to all” (Ladies’ Auxiliaries of the National Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers of Canada, 1955).

With a minimum of ten women, a group could apply for a charter and establish a LA local. Once chartered under the Constitution, a local auxiliary received an official charter and seal, which was the same as that for the men’s locals. Newly formed LA locals also received application cards, a copy of the Constitution (included the bylaws), a ritual, a set of official rules

for conducting meetings, obligations for new members, installation procedures, and an oath of office.. Auxiliary locals held monthly general membership meetings; committee meetings were more often. Each Auxiliary member was issued a membership card, which was a booklet that served to track payment of membership dues. For each month a member paid her membership dues, a stamp was issued by the Local's financial secretary and placed in the booklet beside the designated month (Figure 1, below).



**Figure 1: Ladies Auxiliary Membership Card Book, 1957. Reprinted with Permission.**

The six mandates listed in the Canadian LA Constitution were to: 1) aid in the aims and purposes of the MMSW in Canada; 2) educate and train the women in the labour movement; 3) teach them the correct channels in which to spend the union earned dollars, 4) assist their local unions in times of need and labour disputes; 5) support the Union in all its legislative efforts; 6) provide educational and cultural activities for our children (Ladies' Auxiliaries of the National Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers of Canada, 1955).

Enacting these mandates was accomplished through the production and distribution of other texts, in particular, the monthly newsletters produced by the eastern and western districts and the national Auxiliary organizations. The national newsletters coordinated actions between the eastern and western districts and the District newsletters coordinated action within the districts. The newsletters connected Auxiliary members living in relative isolation to one another and to the higher order social purpose expressed in the Constitution's preamble. They reported on activities of the various LA locals. The recording secretaries of the newly formed locals were instructed to send a report of the month's activities in the local to district and national coordinators. Non-complying locals were called out in the newsletters, most commonly by the National LA Coordinator who penned comments like "all you gals who are responsible for sending me news for this letter had better pull up your socks. It's hard to do a letter without news and what's more it's going to be still harder to do an annual report of the Convention unless I get some facts to go on" (McDonald, 1957a, p. 1). The national newsletters were typed, mimeographed, assembled, stapled, and mailed every tenth day of each month to each LA

member as well as to other unions, auxiliaries, and other political organizations in the U.S., Australia and Scotland (McDonald, 1959a, p. 2).

Our review of the newsletters reveals a format and tone that is informal, conversational, and buoyant. Authored by the national and district coordinators, the newsletters are a stew of the personal and the political. Reports from Auxiliary locals, detailing their various activities are interspersed with items about the author's trials of dental work, meal preparation, moving, and children's antics.

## ***1. Aiding in the aims and purposes of the MMSW in Canada***

### ***1.a. Participating in the Democratic Life of the Union***

Auxiliary delegates to the Union conventions were fully endowed with seats and votes. Auxiliaries funded their own delegates to MMSW conventions where they could initiate, speak to, and vote on resolutions, including the Constitution itself. Each LA local established their own resolution committees to create resolutions to be forwarded to the conventions. Prior to conventions, important documents such as previous year's Convention proceedings, were sent to each local for discussion to support the development of resolutions. The newsletters vigorously encouraged LA members to actively take part in the development of the mandating text: "Resolutions on the constitution will take some time and thought in formulating so get cracking on it sisters. Remember after February we'll be having a referendum vote on the constitution and if you haven't worked on it you'll have only yourselves to blame" (McDonald, 1955a, p. 3). Each LA member had a vote on referendums held on key issues outside of Conventions. Participating in the democratic life of the Union was taken seriously and considered work, a sentiment that was spread through the newsletters. As one Auxiliary newsletter entry reads: "If anyone thinks that we do hard work at the Convention they're right – we do (McDonald, 1959b, p. 1). And another, "the constitution will be the most important item on our agenda that Auxiliary delegates better come prepared to WORK on it!" (McDonald, 1955b, p. 1).



**Figure 2: Ladies Auxiliary Local 131, Trail, British Columbia, 1950, Reprinted with Permission.**

### *1b. Fund-raising activities for political and social campaigns*

One of the aims and purposes of the Canadian MMSW was to engage in concerted political actions that extended beyond its membership to all wage earners. The organization initiated some new campaigns and made financial donations to existing campaigns. To provide the financial support for these campaigns, Auxiliaries raised funds “to spend our hard earned dollars for the benefit of the people of the working class in Canada and United States” (McDonald, 1956a, p. 1). As documented in the newsletters, Auxiliary locals organized rummage sales, bake sales, teas, bazaars. Raffle prizes at these events included electric kettles (McDonald, 1952a), luggage (McDonald, 1953b), fruit cakes (McDonald, 1954), collectively-made afghans (McDonald, 1955a), dolls (McDonald, 1956b); and turkey-dinner hampers (McDonald, 1955c).

Gender politics creep into reports of these events. Of a fund-raising meal at one of the LA locals, the national coordinator writes “it did my heart good to see that the men-folk had taken over the kitchen and cloak room thus leaving ALL the Auxiliary members free to have a wonderful time” (McDonald, 1957b, p. 1). Nonetheless, the LAs’ active fund-raising bequeathed a considerable degree of financial autonomy from the men’s locals. LA locals exercised their financial independence by making their own decisions about the particular political organizations, campaigns, and issues they supported with financial donations.

Fund-raising activities were directed to social and political actions supportive of the development of the union movement. The LA local in Port Colborne, Ontario initiated the first Auxiliary Scholarship in Canada for children of union members (McDonald, 1959a). Funds were raised for union locals wishing to build union halls (International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers, 1957). Donations were also directed to other groups of workers, unionized and non-unionized. The LA Local 117 in Sudbury sent financial support to the Unemployed Association for their trek of 1000 to Ottawa (McDonald, 1961a).

In documenting the fund-raising efforts, the newsletters educated and inspired individual locals with fund-raising successes from their sister locals. In addition to this work at the local level, the newsletters were a vehicle for coordinating fund-raising between locals to support funding raising activities of other unions, charitable and political organizations, and social causes.

### *1.c Engaging in various political actions*

Auxiliaries exerted their financial independence by engaging in various political and social campaigns. They assembled and mailed parcels to Sunnybrook Military Hospital (Local 117) (McDonald, 1954), Christmas baskets for the old age pensioners (Local 133, Britannia) (McDonald, 1952a), and organized an Arthritis Car to provide much-needed health services to local arthritis sufferers.

Auxiliaries were far more than social clubs carrying out the traditional women’s ‘support’ work on campaigns initiated by other groups. Inspired by their vision of a fair and just world, they worked ceaselessly on numerous political campaigns such as the Rosenberg case in the US. Auxiliaries initiated letter-writing campaigns urging local and national politicians to reform the capitalist system for a more equal distribution of wealth. They advocated for greater coverage of the unemployment insurance program, the introduction of a universal National Health Plan, changes in sales tax, and other expansions of the welfare state (IUMMSW, 1957).



At the same time as enacting their commitment to the constitutional mandate of aiding in the aims and purposes of the men's union, the Auxiliaries' political concerns went further afield than those particular to their male counterparts. The 1959 Report to the 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Convention of the IUMMSW reminds the male attendees of the Auxiliaries' aspirations: "We want to create conditions enabling women to fulfill their roles in society, as mothers, workers, and citizens, which included the right to work, the protection of motherhood, equal rights with regard to marriage, children, and property". (IUMMSW, 1959). In reference to International Women's Day, the National Coordinator reminded Auxiliary locals that "It's a date we should never forget" (McDonald, 1962b) and "... remember its OUR day" (McDonald, 1959c). LA locals were on the vanguard of the crusade for equal pay for equal value. Well before becoming a rallying cry of second-wave feminist groups, the Auxiliaries at their Canadian Convention in 1955 in Rossland, BC, put forward a multi-prong resolution to address women's rights that included "an intensified struggle for equal pay for equal value" (Ladies' Auxiliaries of the National Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers of Canada, 1955). They affiliated formally with national and international women's political organizations, including the Canadian Congress of Women and the Voice of Women.

The political issues the LA saw as their concern took them well beyond the trade union movement. A 'Program for the Coming Year', which reflected the breadth of their political ambitions (McDonald, 1952c). The original documenting of the program, found in a LA local secretary's notebook, is seen below (Figure 3 below).

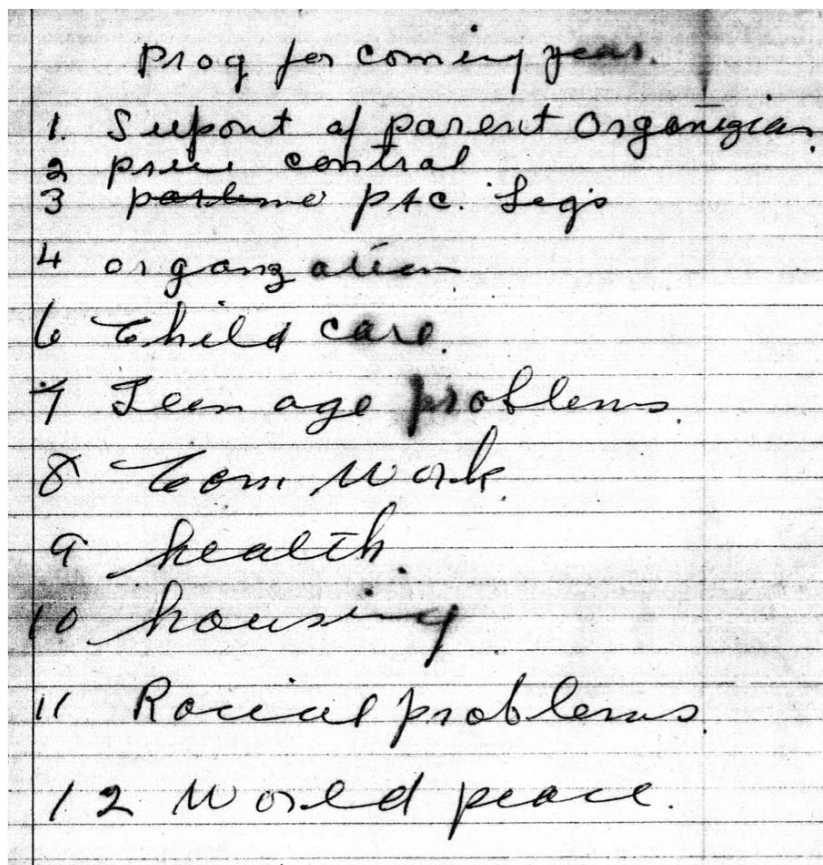


Figure 3: Ladies Auxiliary Program for the Coming Year (n.d.) Reprinted with Permission.

The Auxiliaries saw no contradiction between their participation in the fight for women's autonomy and their interest in working-class emancipation. Auxiliary women believed that they had a common enemy with their waged husbands, as Guard (1995) argues. The same mechanisms that lead to the exploitation of waged workers also result in prices that maximize profits and a whole array of social problems such as health inequities, inadequate housing, and racism. But, the Auxiliaries' commitment to the mandate of aiding in the aims and purposes of the men's union did not mean that the women unquestioningly supported the leadership of the male locals. The newsletters indicate that the LA challenged the leadership of the men's locals when they saw fit. For instance, at a membership meeting of a men's local, one newsletter reports that the secretary of the LA local took the floor, where, "she did a magnificent job in 'telling off' the Executive". The union local's executive is then described as "a panicky bunch, adjourning the meeting quickly so they wouldn't have any more bricks heaved at them at the meeting" and followed by the commentary, "Ah well, we were here before them and we will be around a long time after they've been forgotten – that's for sure!" (McDonald, 1960a).

To inspire and sustain the work of the wide-ranging political campaigns, the newsletters often contained excerpts from other sources, carefully selected and vigorously editorialized. Photocopied articles from mainstream newspapers often appeared on topics such as women's equality, world peace, and unemployment and racism. The newsletters would, at times, enclose other texts for use in directed political campaigns. For instance, in 1960, Auxiliary members received, along with their copy of the national newsletter, a number of "Stop all tests – Ban the bomb" for the suggested use on the women's correspondence and other forms of distribution (McDonald, 1960b).

## ***2. Educating and training women in the labour movement***

The Auxiliaries activated this mandate by hosting educational and shop steward schools on trade unionism and the labour movement in general (McDonald, 1961a; McDonald 1960c). Topics covered in the education classes extended to other wide-ranging issues such as the pasteurization of milk, proposed sales taxes, and jury duty. These education sessions drew in wives, mothers, and sisters of the miners who were otherwise isolated.

The newsletters coordinated LA locals' educational activities by providing a forum for the locals to share resources, including books and films, to support these ongoing educational activities at the local level. LA locals had their own educational committees, charged with the responsibility of hosting film nights and discussion circles.

The newsletters were also direct conduits for educating Auxiliary women. Historical analyses of the labour movement and the role of women was a key theme of the education imparted in the newsletters. For instance, referring to the legendary IWW organizer, Joe Hill, to describe the events on a picket line, one newsletter ends with "Joe Hill is still with us" (McDonald, 1951a). Another reads, "It's official ... the strike against the Yale Lead and Zinc Co. in the Kaslo area of BC has terminated with a victory for the Union. They couldn't lose – with the kind of help they got from the Auxiliary members" (McDonald, 1956d).

The newsletters also educated and trained Auxiliary members on the principles of democratic decision-making. The purchase of pamphlets such as "Parliamentary Procedure at a Glance" by LA locals was coordinated through the newsletters with accompanying instructions: "... don't forget, each [LA local] president should also have a gavel – and USE it!" (McDonald, 1963). The newsletters implored members to exert their independence in all democratic political processes: "It makes me boil when I hear some women say 'oh I never bother to vote I leave all

that to the man of the house.” No wonder we find ourselves in such a mess not only provincially, but federally and throughout the world” (McDonald, 1959d).

The newsletters imparted words of wisdom on other themes including the importance of collective action, the political and economic value of women’s unpaid domestic work, the radicalizing impact of strikes, and the importance of building of a more just, equitable, and peaceful world. For instance, a newsletter in 1960, a time when the United States had enough nuclear power to obliterate the world’s population, encouraged its readers to set aside differences in their religious affiliations and political positions. “Whatever your religion, your politics and your sentiments, to all women everywhere, every corner of the world, peace is hope, peace is love, peace is the dream come true” (McDonald, 1960e).

The district newsletters coordinated actions within the districts in central and western Canada and across these jurisdictions by way of the national newsletters. LA women in Ontario would learn of newly established locals in the west and vice-versa. Readers were reminded of the hard-working, collectively minded individuals behind the creation of new locals and the purpose they were to serve: “The women of Uranium City wish to form a Mine-Mill Auxiliary and a preliminary meeting has been held at which a provisional executive has been set up .... here are men and women in an isolated community threatened with extinction, who realize that unity alone can offer any hope of security for the working people of Canada” (McDonald, 1960f).

The LA Auxiliary pre-dated second wave feminism and the topic of political and economic value of women’s domestic work was not part of the prevailing consciousness. It was, however, a topic on the Auxiliary leadership’s list of priorities for member education. The newsletters spoke directly to the members as unpaid labourers about issues such as the difficulty in calculating working hours of domestic work, “Did you know that if *you* are a married woman with three children that *you* work a seventy four hour week? It’s true according to a survey made recently among 1800 women. The survey was conducted to establish the ‘economic value’ of a woman’s work in the home. She’s lucky if it’s ONLY a 74 hour week” (McDonald, 1951b). However sarcastic, the closing sentence privileges the knowledge of those who perform the work over the ‘experts’ conducting the survey and proclaiming on its results. Humorous content was intermingled with the factual. Domestic work might not produce surplus value, as does labour performed under capitalist production, but it has other uses. The National LA Coordinator wrote “... I really get a kick out of ‘kneading’ the dough...I pretend it’s a few mine managers I know and I really work off steam by punching that dough around – try it sometime and see for yourself!” (McDonald, 1958b).

The newsletters educated LA women about what workers can and should expect from their union. During the times of the USWA raids, the Auxiliary women would warn of the dangers of their husbands, fathers, and sons voting in favour of being represented by a union that did not bargain in the interests of the workers or refuse to take up their grievances and handle compensation claim cases.

### ***3. Teaching women in the labour movement the correct channels in which to spend the union earned dollars***

As purchasers of food, clothing, and other basic necessities, Auxiliary members played an important role in fuelling the growing post-war economy. If the purchasing power of Auxiliary members was to be harnessed for the collective good, they needed direction and information on current products and campaigns. Ongoing strikes were identified and any products produced by scab labour were itemized to coordinate large-scale boycotts by the LA

members in each of their locals: “if you are tempted to buy Westinghouse products – don’t until this strike has been won by Local 504. United Electrical Workers Union have always supported Mine-Mill whole heartedly in all of our struggles – let’s do the same for them!” (McDonald, 1959e). The newsletters often contained bulletins on co-operatives and their products identified so individual LA members could support them with their purchases. The newsletters shared information and coordinated campaigns related to rising food prices. The newsletters linked women’s role as the purchasers of consumer goods to the larger political and economic forces: “The next time you buy groceries, don’t be surprised if you pay more for sugar. I read on a financial page of a Toronto paper where the wholesale price of sugar had jumped over 8 dollars a ton during the recent US Cuban crisis – why? For profit of course – and who’s going to have to pay through the nose as always? You that’s who!” (McDonald, 1962c).

The individual LA locals crafted their own campaigns based on the information gained from the newsletters. For instance, because milk was important to smelter-workers to offset the lead poisoning contracted by working in the smelters (until it was found that the cows raised in the vicinity of the smelter were leaded too), when the price of milk was raised in 1952, the newsletter issued a bulletin and Local 133 in Britannia BC petitioned the Provincial Cabinet for a milk subsidy (McDonald, 1952a). The connection between men’s wages and women’s purchasing power was reinforced. A LA local’s petition to an employer directly for higher wages is referenced in the following “They sent a scorching letter to the manager of the Delora Smelting and Refining Co. regarding a raise in wages for their men folk. Good stuff sisters – after all the ‘women’ of the family have to do the wrestling with the high cost of living.” (McDonald, 1952d).

#### ***4. Assisting their local unions in times of need and labour disputes***

The newsletters reported on Auxiliary activities supporting their local unions’ day-to-day activities. The women acted as election scrutinizers for men’s local (Local 136, Port Colborne) (McDonald, 1953e). They assisted the Local Union in their social affairs such as picnics, socials, parties, dances, steward’s banquets, and charter banquettes (IUMMSW, 1957). Some of these banquets and other social events brought out hundreds of people, particularly in the large locals such as Sudbury where the local had over 18,000 members at its peak.

They also supported their local unions during strikes and the newsletters were instrumental in coordinating these activities, especially support for striking locals from non-striking Auxiliary locals. One newsletter entry tells the readers that the Auxiliary local in Trail BC (Local 131) cancelled their children’s Christmas party so that they could send more money to support the strikers in Sudbury, Ontario (McDonald, 1958b). Clothing donations assembled and shipped from afar were measured in poundage. “Auxiliary 232 sent 130 pounds of clothing was sent to Sudbury; 250 pounds sent to Murdochville” (McDonald, 1959c).

Auxiliaries donated financially to striking locals. They also donated their own labour, bringing food and drink to the picket line (McDonald, 1958a). They set up committees to handle, remake, and renovate used clothing for striking family members, especially in those bitter winter strikes and established trading posts for the exchange of food and used clothing. Toys were collected and distributed to strikers’ children (McDonald, 1953e). Town merchants were approached for food and financial donations. The newsletters reported on all these supportive activities of the Auxiliaries.

The newsletters encouraged Auxiliary members to educate non-Auxiliary wives about the issues underpinning the strikes. At the same time as providing the much-needed support for the

strikes, reaching out to potential new Auxiliary members was guaranteed to increase Auxiliary membership (McDonald, 1958c). During the 1958 strike in Sudbury Ontario, the auxiliary report of women volunteering “to visit the picket lines everyday and cheer their men up” was followed by instructions to the women: “Each sister is to try to get a non-member to go with her on these visits”. (McDonald, 1958d).

LA women acted as a reserve army in the unpaid work of union militancy, as they had in other unions in labour history, for instance the Women’s Emergency Brigade in the 1937 Sit-Down auto-industry strikes organized their picket line activities along military lines with a captain and lieutenants and carried a bar of soap in one pocket and a sock in the other so they couldn’t be charged with carrying a weapon (Dollinger & Dollinger, 2000; Yeghissian, 1980). MMSW Auxiliary members walked the picket and demonstration lines, sometimes along side the men, sometimes on their own. In the picture, below, the picket line of wives and children in the forty below temperatures of a Kirkland Lake winter was over two-miles long. It formed in support of the union because the company had refused to negotiate with the union, defying a labour relations board ruling in doing so.



**Figure 3: Mine Mill Picket Line, Kirkland Lake, 1941, Reprinted with Permission.**

For some women, their action on the picket lines was radicalizing and gave them confidence to take on other political issues. The newsletters reminded Auxiliary members of the new solidarities that arise from strikes: “I do think that a big struggle like the one we’ve just been through brings all of us so much closer together, and as far as I am concerned it has made me resolve to work all the harder for the good of our whole organization” (McDonald, 1959c). At the same time, the traditional role of women supporting their men was expressed “It’s wonderful thing to be able to walk with our heads up and to be able to look anyone in the eye honestly and be able to say “I did my little bit too” (McDonald, 1958b).

### ***5. Supporting the Union in all its legislative efforts***

Health and safety in the mining industry was a constant concern of the locals and the Auxiliaries alike. Miners wives were constant witnesses to diseases and injuries the men incurred from their working conditions. Silicosis in particular was widespread and predisposed men to tuberculosis, often leading to rapid physical decline and early death (Paterson, 1961). In one-industry mining towns, injuries and fatalities among miners had disastrous consequences for families as the jobs for wives were limited to the retail and clerical sectors, where informal hiring practices favouring single over married women prevailed (Forestell, 2003). The efforts of the Auxiliaries (in conjunction with the Union at large) led to the development of occupational and health and safety legislation that now covers all workers and all industrial sectors. The three rights - to know hazards in the workplace, to participate in decisions related to work safety, and to refuse unsafe work – enshrined in Canadian occupational health and safety legislation reflected the realities of the harshest, most dangerous form of work: mining.

Auxiliary women demonstrated their commitment to the Union's legislative efforts through a variety of actions, which were meticulously documented in the newsletters. They worked on the election campaigns of labour candidates in their civic elections (McDonald, 1953b), formed delegations and travelled to Ottawa to interview MPs on atomic bomb testing and world disarmament (McDonald, 1956b). Family holidays were interrupted to protest those changes to the criminal code that would “enslave the Canadian Labour movement” and solidify “McCarthyism in Canada” (McDonald, 1954). They took this campaign, such as the proposed union-limiting amendments to the criminal code to other non-union women's organizations and educated them on the “evils contained in Bill H8 and how important it is for all of us to do a job of protesting the contemplated passage of this infamous piece of legislation.... designed to smash trade unions” (McDonald, 1952b). On pivotal issues the newsletter readers were reminded that we must “do a job of renewing our protests” and that “it is OUR job because we are an important part of Mine-Mill” (McDonald, 1952a).

### ***6. Providing educational and cultural activities for our children***

The constitution's imperative “to provide educational and cultural activities for our children” was enacted by the Auxiliaries at the local level (Ladies Auxiliaries of the National Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers of Canada, 1955). The newsletters depicted the range of activities. Various locals organized bowling, volleyball, and other sports teams for the children, and held children-only Christmas parties. LA Local 117 was particularly active on the cultural front because their associated MMSW Local, 598, employed its own Recreation Director (Buse, 1995). Working closely with the Recreation Director, the LA 117 women ran the children's summer camp outside of Sudbury, Ontario on land purchased by the men's local. This local ran their own dance school, headed by the Nancy Dent, the New York trained modern dancer (Bowring, 2005). The school boasted of over two hundred children and forty adult students who regularly attended classes in ballet, folk, and modern dance for the nominal fee of 50 cents per lesson, a fraction of the cost in commercial dance schools (Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Canada, 1956). The LA 131 sponsored the dance school's students to attend the Banff Summer School of the Performing Arts (McDonald, 1952a; McDonald, 1953f).

## Conclusion

The prevailing view of women's contribution to the progressive movements holds that their participation was ad hoc and temporary. In particular, women's auxiliaries are thought to form only to dissolve soon after and only when there is a strike or organizing drive among the male workers. Indeed, women often do form a reserve army in the unpaid work of union militancy, as they do in the paid labour market, taking on more of the male-assigned functions at times of strikes or other crises. But, even within this general pattern, there are exceptions, as this study finds. The Auxiliaries were established in parallel with the men's locals and continued for more than twenty years. The Auxiliaries were long-term organizations. They did not spring up during strikes only to disband several months afterwards. The organizing of the Auxiliary went on concurrently with the organizing with the men's locals.

In keeping with the interests of Institutional Ethnography, this paper focused on texts, examining how the mandating Constitutional text was activated through the daily work of the Ladies Auxiliary. By illustrating the linkages between the Constitution and the national and district newsletters, this paper has shown how texts coordinated the work of the Ladies Auxiliary at the local, district, and national levels. The study finds that in activating the mandates of it Constitution, the MMSW LAs both followed and challenged the conventional gender norms of the times. Their work was not paid work and it did not involve negotiating collective agreements with employers. Their traditional supportive women's work included feeding striking families, organizing massive clothing drives, and visiting the sick in hospital. LAs held raffles, bazaars, bake sales, dinners, teenage fashion shows, Christmas parties, and card nights. These traditional forms of 'women's' work were crucial to maintaining the social fabric of the union and provided a local system supporting the health and welfare of the community. However, the MMSW LA was more than a 'reserve army' of emotional and supportive labourers.

The work that these women did challenged the assumption that union struggles took place at the bargaining table alone, under the steam of men alone. Their consumer action, education, and political participation were essential to the creation of a new political and social order, an order in which labour unions could be expected to thrive. Their independence from the men's locals was formalized in the MMSW's and Auxiliary Constitutions. In practice, their fund-raising activities provided them with some financial autonomy, which they used to support their own political agenda including women's emancipation.

The gains made by labour unions in Canada, such as MMSW, during the war and post-war years, which brought higher wages and endowed workers with some control over their working conditions, were only possible because women in formal organizations such as auxiliaries were providing caring labour. Although the division of labour was a highly gendered one – with women at the kitchen tables and men at the bargaining tables – the male leadership of the MMSW union commonly asserted that women's active involvement was necessary if the working class was going to achieve emancipation. All the work these women did – the visible and the invisible, the work that followed the gender scripts of the times and the work that did not – contributed to the contemporary labour movement in Canada. It is a labour movement that can now boast of equal rates of unionization for men and women. This was not the case even two decades ago, when a greater proportion of working men were unionized in comparison to working women. But, there are many areas of the labour movement in which the work must continue. For instance, looking more closely at why the rates of unionization for men and women have converged, it becomes clear that men's rates have decreased more than women's rates have increased. There is much work to be done to regain ground the labour movement previously

won. At the same time, the work must venture into new areas, such as the growing pool of contract, temporary, precarious workers, whose relationship with an employer has become much more tenuous and complicated, if they are given a fair wage. Recognizing and honouring the work of labour activists of the past and building on those past successes is a crucial to these areas of work the in labour movement.



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