Intersectionality at Work: Young Women Organizers Participation in Labour Youth Programs in Canada

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In Canada in the 1990s the labour movement expressed deep concern about widespread union density decline and aging memberships in trade unions (Gomez, Gunderson and Meltz, 2002; Jackson, 2005; Lowe and Rastin, 2000; Tannock and Flocks, 2002). In response to growing anxiety about the scarcity of young unionists for the future strength of organized labour, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the country’s central labour body, adopted a resolution at its 1996 Convention directing its affiliate unions to reach out to youth and to make youth organizing a priority. This paper analyzes the experiences of a diverse group of women labour activists participating in youth programs in English Canada. Focusing specifically on the multiple identities of the young women activists, consideration is given to how their age, gender and racialized identities affected their participation in youth programs in the Canadian labour movement. I argue that the intersectional identities of the women placed them on the margins of labour organizations, which shaped their response to the established practices of labour bodies, and created systemic disadvantages in their organizing role.

This case study of youth organizers draws on Joan Acker’s inequality regimes perspective (2006, 2006a), an approach to conceptualizing intersectional inequality in organizations. The paper also follows the work of Geraldine Healy, Keywords: young women, union organizing, organized labour Canada, youth internships.

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Harriet Bradley, and Cynthia Forson (2011) who apply Acker’s framework to their study of minority women in the U.K. public sector (see also Holgate et al., 2006). Acker argues that the bases of inequality in work organizations are grounded in class, gender and racial hierarchies that mirror social inequalities within the wider society. Organizational class hierarchies reflect historically constructed gendered and racialized normative systems that privilege white masculine values - an ongoing effect of the historical development of capitalism in which white males dominated (and continue to dominate) the most powerful and largest bureaucratic organizations. Organizational practices and processes in work organizations, Acker contends, operate in the interests of the dominant white male power hierarchies leading to inequality regimes that disadvantage gendered, racialized, and other workers with different social identities. Intersectional identity multiplies and complicates disadvantages faced by workers. Acker argues that inequality regimes are made visible in situations where organizations initiate change efforts (e.g., affirmative action). This study of youth outreach programs represents a change effort by organized labour and helps to illustrate the processes creating barriers to equality. Following Acker’s framework, the analysis of young women organizers presented here uncovers the complex and multifaceted inequality regime dynamics that sustain gender, race, and age power differentials within Canadian labour movement organizations.

The paper begins with a discussion of the methodology followed by a concise overview of youth programs in the Canadian labour movement. Next is a brief review of feminist approaches to theorizing and applying intersectionality to empirical studies, with specific focus on Acker’s inequality regimes perspective. A detailed analysis of the case study findings is then presented, including discussion and a brief conclusion.

**Methodology**

Fourteen young women organizers working in unions and labour federations in English Canada were interviewed. Women were selected because they are a recognized equity group and because their experiences as labour organizers are relatively unknown in Canada. Following the snowball method, a few organizers were contacted first by the author and these respondents offered additional names of young women to interview. The respondents were asked questions concerning: their age; family, class, educational, and labour background; how they became involved in labour organizing; and, details about their particular organizing experiences. Of the 14 respondents 10 were 30 years of age or younger at the time of the interview. A majority of women interviewed were racialized: eight women self-identified as women of colour (e.g., Black, Asian), and another four described themselves as ethnic/racialized such as South American or Italian-Canadian. At least half described themselves as having working class backgrounds or as new immigrants, more than half held university degrees, and all but one woman had some university or post-secondary education.

Their labour affiliations were wide ranging and comprised national and provincial labour federations, municipal labour councils, large private sector unions, and public
sector unions. The jobs held by the women included both internal and external labour organizing positions. Internally, they worked as youth organizers engaging in educating and mobilizing youth within unions and the labour movement, and as youth representatives in elected or appointed positions on labour decision-making bodies (e.g., Executive). A few others were involved internally within their unions serving as union stewards, or on committees such as bargaining committees. External organizing comprised union organizing in certification campaigns involving card signing and doing house calls. Seven women held youth internships provided by unions to train and recruit youth to the labour movement. Union organizers worked in various provinces in Canada (Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Ontario, Québec, Nova Scotia) and the United States (New York, California, Massachusetts). Many of the women held more than one position, for example, starting off in an internship, and then becoming a full-time organizer (see Table I for list of respondents).

Table 1: Young Women Organizers Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position(s)</th>
<th>Date of Interview(s)</th>
<th>Labour Organization(s)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>Intern; Union Organizer</td>
<td>Mar 15, 2004; July 10, 2007</td>
<td>Private sector International Unions</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>South American Working Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>Youth Organizer; Union Org</td>
<td>May 5, 2004</td>
<td>Private Sector International; Labour Federation</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Italian Working Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Union Organizer</td>
<td>Apr 27, 2004</td>
<td>Public Sector Union; Labour Federation</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Woman of Colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Intern; Union Organizer</td>
<td>Aug 23, 2006</td>
<td>Private Sector Internals; Public Sector Union</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zena</td>
<td>Intern Union Organizer</td>
<td>Sept 11, 2003</td>
<td>Private Sector International</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>New Immigrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>Union Organizer</td>
<td>Feb 12, 2008</td>
<td>Private Sector International</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Asian New Immigrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>Intern</td>
<td>Feb 11, 2008</td>
<td>Public Sector Union</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>DNSI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>Intern</td>
<td>Feb 8, 2008</td>
<td>Public Sector Union</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>DNSI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angie</td>
<td>Youth Representative; Union Organizer</td>
<td>Aug 21, 2007</td>
<td>Labour Federations and Private Sector Union Organizer</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Woman of Colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Intern; Union Organizer</td>
<td>July 9, 2007</td>
<td>Private Sector International; Public Sector Union</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Youth Organizer</td>
<td>July 3, 2007</td>
<td>Labour Federations and Unions</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>South American Working Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cher</td>
<td>Intern; Union Organizer</td>
<td>Jan 11, 2010</td>
<td>Private Sector International &amp; Canadian Private Sector Union</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Black-African Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terri</td>
<td>Intern; Union Organizer</td>
<td>Mar 9, 2012</td>
<td>Private Sector International</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Black-African Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Intern; Union Organizer</td>
<td>Mar 10, 2012</td>
<td>Labour Federation Private Sector Unions</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Pseudonyms  
+ Age at first interview  
^ Respondent Self-Identified  
DNSI Did not self-identify
Labour Youth Initiatives
Youth are designated an equity-seeking group by most Canadian unions. Statistics Canada defines youth as the 15 to 24 year age group; however, labour organizations use a range of age definitions. Youth are identified an equity category because: they are under-represented in union memberships and union leadership positions; they experience numerous disadvantages in the workplace such as age discrimination and high levels of unemployment; and, they are over represented in low wage, flexible or precarious jobs in sectors with low union density (DiCaro, 2008; Jackson, 2005; Sargeant, 2013; TD Economics Observation, 2012; Geobey, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2013). Labour youth programs were introduced in the mid 1990s to improve the situation of young people in the labour market and to revitalize unions.

By the mid-1990s many unions understood the importance of organizing youth as a strategy to expand unionization and to rejuvenate participation internally within labour organizations (Tannock and Flocks, 2002; Lipsig-Mumme, 2003; Forester, 2003). A variety of programs were implemented to promote the unionization of young workers, and to mobilize or integrate them inside labour organizations. A number of initiatives were intended to prepare a new generation of unionists to assume leadership positions. By 2002 every major union in Canada had pledged their commitment to improving youth representation (Tannock and Flocks, 2002, p. 3). The CLC and provincial labour federations, Canadian and international U.S. based unions, and labour councils implemented youth programs. This included a range of initiatives such as: youth committees and caucuses; staff positions targeted to the interests of young people (e.g., Saskatchewan Federation of Labour Youth Liaison Coordinator); youth internships - with many focused on training and hiring young people to become union organizers; and, paid educational programs for young workers teaching them about unions and social justice organizing (e.g., Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), Solidarity Works!). A small number of unions and labour federations introduced designated Affirmative Action positions for youth on union Executive Boards. The youth affirmative action seats operate identically to the representational structure created for equity seeking groups such as women or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) members inside unions and labour federations. A few labour organizations changed their constitutional provisions or union policy to ensure better representation and advocacy for young unionists. There was, at this time, a burst of activity around youth activism and youth organizing, with the category “youth” becoming synonymous with the needs of equity-seeking groups.

In the post-2008 recessionary economy which significantly diminished jobs for youth (Arnup and Sinclair-Walters, 2013), attention to youth unemployment and the need to unionize young people was revived in Canadian labour circles. However, from 2000 onwards, the array of labour
youth programs that were launched in the mid- to late 1990s have dwindled even though youth unemployment has increased in some provinces (Geobey, 2013, p. 14) and organized labour remains committed to renewal. There are various reasons to explain why youth programs have lost ground in recent years. Youth are a troubling equity group for labour, in part, because they are a transitional category that is difficult to define. As young people mature they out grow the equity designation, hindering the continuity of youth leadership and the youth labour agenda. Moreover, tension between established union memberships and young people has surfaced. For instance, youth do not often identify with traditional bread and butter labour issues such as securing pensions and ensuring seniority provisions; and unions adopting two-tiered structures in collective agreements have been met with vigorous complaints that the practice discriminates against younger union members (Legault, 2009; AFL/CIO Working America, 2009). Neo-liberal restructuring is also undermining support for equity initiatives (Briskin, 2008; 2011; 2007; Foley and Baker, 2009) and this trend is affecting youth labour projects. For example, the popular youth activist program, Solidarity Works! - once co-sponsored by the CLC and OFL - has not been funded since 2007 (Liu, 2011, p. 13). The CLC held only one conference solely dedicated to youth and funding of the CLC Summer Camp. Many once vibrant youth committees are inactive or operate with few members.

A further problematic aspect of the youth equity category that may be weakening the youth labour agenda is the inattention paid to intersectional difference. As discussed in detail below, the lack of sensitivity to intersectional difference in the organizational power structures of unions and labour bodies is undermining and disadvantaging young labour activists. The young women organizers in this study experienced intersectional discrimination linked to their age, gender, and racialized identities. Sometimes they experienced outright discrimination such as sexism or racism while at other times they encountered subtle “intimations of difference” (Healy and Mukherjee, 2005, p. 216) or indirect discrimination that placed them in subordinate, marginal or risky situations in their organizing work. The young respondents maintained their multiple identities contributed to their sense of marginalization, and created specific problems organizing that were not fully acknowledged by their employers.

**Applying Intersectionality: inequality regimes**

Feminist theory typically recognizes that gender intersects with other social identities. Referred to as intersectionality, multiple axes of differentiation are understood to construct gender experiences in varied ways (Davis, 2008). While there is consensus among feminists of the importance of intersectionality, considerable debate revolves around its meaning. Whether or not intersectionality is a theory, a concept, a conceptual framework, an
analytical strategy or tool, or an analytical lens, is undecided and remains contentious (e.g. Davis, 2008; Nash, 2008). Moreover, the issue “of how to study intersectionality, that is [of] its methodology,” (McCall, 2005, 1771) is also subject to debate. As Vivian May explains, “even if one agrees, for the sake of argument that “we” all ‘do’ intersectional work, the question remains, how?” (2012, p. 169). A key concern emerging in feminist scholarship is how to undertake practical or empirical application of feminist intersectional analyses. The problem of putting intersectionality into practice is apparent in a range of disciplines or scholarly areas (Holgate et al., 2006; Davis, 2008; Nash, 2008; Shields, 2008; Collins, 2009). Particularly problematic is devising a methodological framework to study multi-identity oppression (McCall, 2005; Dill and Zambrana, 2009; Healy et al., 2011).

Given the difficulties by feminists of defining or theorizing intersectionality, in addition to the problem of establishing a methodological approach to analyze intersectional difference, it is not surprising that some areas of academic scholarship have yet to fully incorporate intersectional thought into their fields of study. Labour Studies is an example of an interdisciplinary field that has applied intersectionality inconsistently and unevenly, or not at all. While certain topic areas such as immigration studies, low-wage work, and labour market precarity have taken into account ‘difference’ usually along the axes of gender and/or racialized difference, and citizenship status (e.g. Dua and Robertson, 1999; Wallis and Kwok, 2008; Flores-Gonzalez et al. 2013; Vosko, 2000), analyses of multiple forms of discrimination that capture the interaction among several axes of oppression (class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, disability) are less common (see Healy et al., 2006). In scholarship on trade unions, the interaction of multiple forms of oppression has not been a major focus until quite recently. A small literature is beginning to emerge that investigates intersectional identity dynamics within unions such as the work by Briskin (2008; 2011), Moore, Wright and Conley (2011), and Bryant-Anderson and Roby (2012). However, these studies tend to be the exception. The Labour studies literature on youth organizers, as already indicated, has limited gender and race analysis, and no discussion of the disadvantages attached to multiple identities (see Feekin and Widenor, 2003; Best, n.d.; Bunnage and Stepan-Norris, 2004; AFL/CIO, Working America, 2009; Fontes and Margolies, 2010; ITUC, 2011). Young workers and unionized youth are generally understood as a homogenous group and are typically described as a ‘young worker’ or ‘youth activist’, with little examination of gender or race specific difference, or other forms of social difference such as disability. Although diversity and equity policy is strongly supported by organized labour in Canada (Hunt and Rayside, 2007; Briskin, 2008, pp. 202-3; CLC, 2011), there is almost no discussion of intersectional difference in relation to the youth agenda (see Tannock, 2001; Gomez, Gunderson and Meltz, 2002; Tannock and Flocks, 2002; Liu and O’Halloran, 2005). Particularly present
are studies examining the experiences of young, gendered, racialized labour activists and organizers. The inattention to multiple identities is puzzling given that youth is often mentioned as an equity group and included in the long list of equity seeking constituencies (i.e., women, racialized and LGBT communities).

A possible reason for this theoretical oversight relates to the lack of a workable intersectional methodology, and the difficulty of applying an intersectional lens to social concerns. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2009), intersectional scholarship has shifted focus from the study of social issues and social inequality within intersecting systems of power relations, to analyses of identity narratives framed within theoretical discussions of performativity, social constructionism, and discourse analysis. This shift away from analyses of social structural and institutional hierarchies of power has curtailed analyses of how intersectional systems of power are organized. Acker’s inequality regimes framework stands out as an important approach because of its capacity to attend to multiple identities while at the same time analyzing how “inequality-producing processes actually work” and are reproduced within organizations (2006, p. 442).

Inequality Regimes

The inequality regimes approach combines an analysis of organizational practices and processes with an investigation of how class, gender, and race difference structure specific forms of male power within work organizations (Acker 2006; 2006a). Inequality regimes are defined by Acker as:

... systemic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations (Acker, 2006, p. 443).

Arguing that organizational processes and practices construct class, gender, and racial disparities inside organizations, and that these link to social inequalities within the wider society, her approach accomplishes the difficult task of bridging intersectional difference within a broader framework of systemic inequality in capitalism. While Acker’s conceptual framework operates on these two levels, she is mainly concerned with how the processes of organizing work produce and sustain complex inequalities and discrimination in workplaces (2006, p. 442; see also Healy et al., 2011, p. 471). The bases of inequality in work organizations are conceptualized in reference to the following components: organizing the general requirements of work; organizing class hierarchies; recruitment
and hiring, and training; wage setting and supervisory practices; and, informal interactions while ‘doing the work’ (Acker, 2006, pp. 448-451; Acker, 2006a, pp. 9-11). These components of inequality regimes combine within capitalist organizations to uphold masculine values that emphasize the archetypical image of an unencumbered (white) male who dedicates his life to the needs of the organization, working long hours and weekends, and who is not distracted by outside commitments such as family while on the job. In this sense, organizations in capitalist societies are masculinized in that they do not take responsibility for basic human needs (social reproduction) beyond the workplace. Further, notions of masculinity infuse organizational culture with assumptions about masculine leadership and workplace culture that emphasize mental and/or physical strength, risk taking, individualism, and competitive and aggressive behaviour. Wage setting and supervisory practices are informed by gender and race assumptions (stereotypes) about competence, talent and skill. Work that conforms to masculine attributes is valorized, while work associated with feminine caring roles and service to others is devalorized. Organizational decisions about who is suitable to hire and train for particular jobs are based on, “images of appropriate gendered and racialized bodies” (Acker, 2006, p. 449). These inequities are not readily recognized by privileged groups working inside organizations, as Acker observes, “[p]eople in dominant groups generally see inequality as existing somewhere else not where they are” (2006, p.452). Overall, the organizational components of inequality regimes produce class, race, and gender disparities by distributing men, women, racialized groups and other minorities unevenly and unequally within organizational class hierarchies.

According to Acker all organizations have inequality regimes, “[e]ven organizations that have explicit egalitarian goals develop inequality regimes over time” (2006, p. 443). Trade unions and labour organizations that espouse an egalitarian ideology are marked by systemic inequalities and hierarchical power structures which Acker observes are primarily linked to the structure of labour leadership:

Labor unions and professional associations can act to reduce power differences across class hierarchies. However, these organizations have historically been dominated by white men with the consequence that white women and people of color have not had increases in organizational power equal to white men (2006, p. 447).

Gender and race disparities are apparent in the labour leadership in Canada (Paavo, 2006; Bentham, 2007; Das Gupta, 2007; Briskin, 2011) and the U.S. (Bryant–Anderson and Roby, 2012). The underrepresentation of women, especially young women, racialized groups, and other members
of equity seeking groups within leadership structures, continues to be identified as one of the foremost challenges facing the Canadian labour movement (e.g., Wall, 2009; OFL, 2012).

In the following discussion, Acker’s inequality regime components are used to analyze the interview findings for this study. Specific attention is given to how the multiple identities of the women intersect with the organizational processes (e.g., supervision, recruitment, training, promotion) and hierarchical power structures of the labour organizations. The young organizers’ gender, age, and racial identity - and oftentimes the interaction among those identities - shaped their experiences both in the field (i.e., in union organizing campaigns) and inside labour movement organizations (i.e., internal organizing).

Findings

Organizing the general requirements of work
The ‘general requirements of work’ component defined by Acker comprising white masculine work practices, more than any other component, explains the young women’s experiences in the labour organizations in which they worked. Although the male dominance of the labour movement is widely taken for granted in feminist analyses (Pocock, 1997; Creese, 1999; Broadbent and Ford, 2008), studies specifically examining the male culture of organizing are surprisingly sparse. For this reason, Acker’s formulation particularizing masculine organizing processes and practices in organizations is especially useful. The bases of inequality in labour unions is primarily linked to the masculinized culture emphasizing individualism, competition, risk-taking, heterosexuality, and total commitment to the paid job. The young organizers interviewed understood that job expectations were fundamentally embedded in masculine labour culture, but they also expressed strong objections to masculinized work practices. They especially rejected practices and policy that discounted the importance of life outside of work.

Work/life balance: total commitment to the job
All of the women interviewed spoke to the unbounded obligations of their work and the explicit expectations by their labour employers to fully commit to organizing. This expectation applied to both union and youth organizers and created significant problems, hardship, and anxiety in relation to their personal lives, “There seems to be this unsaid expectation that you will work 60, 80 hour work weeks because you are so committed to the movement and you do feel silent... and there’s almost a level of competition there” (Interview 9, Angie). Organizers stated repeatedly that the intensive workload was problematic to their health and emotional well-being. After working for less than two years, a union organizer explained, “For two months I was on stress leave” (Interview 1, Sonia). At the time of the interview she had worked 20 consecutive days without a break. Long
work hours and “life on the road” were identified as the most challenging aspects of the job. Accepted union policy required working for long stretches at a time, often away from home, and putting in exceedingly long days, “working out of your car and suitcase is hard long term. You can’t plan anything with your family or friends. You can’t even keep a plant alive at home” (Interview 14, Laura). The respondents reported feeling socially isolated due to the irregular work patterns and the demands such as driving far distances alone:

By the time I left the job last year in April I had over 277,000 [km] or something on it [automobile], I drove all over the place. A lot of driving… just not taking care of yourself… So it took its toll – on me physically I wasn’t teating well… I found my immune system was being compromised. I was getting sick a lot. (Interview 12, Cher).

Expressing deep resentment about being away from home for long periods and missing out on significant social occasions, they commented on the difficulty of sustaining intimate relationships with close friends, especially intimate partners, and immediate family:

As an organizer, you’re away from home so much so you want to go home and see family and friends… I lived out of a suitcase most of the time; I’d only be in [home city] maybe half the year. Even more difficult was that I couldn’t make any commitments to family or friends, so my best friend was getting married and I was like, “maybe, maybe I can come”. I missed showers, birthdays, groups’ gatherings, I love those things and you just want to hang out with your friends and laugh… so I wasn’t around for 2 years almost and I was getting burnt out. (Interview 10, Sue)

Rooks’ study of United States organizers (2003), points to the long hours, emotional demands, and extensive travel (long absences from home) endured by young unionists, and argues the work conditions reflect a “cowboy mentality.” She contends that the union organizing culture celebrates self-sacrifice (to the job) and machismo (toughness) at the expense of women and racialized minorities who become alienated and excluded from the American labour movement. The respondents in this study repeated similar observations.

The organizers believed their young age and junior status worked against them when supervisors intensified their work demands, requiring them to work long hours on nights and week-ends:

While interning we usually worked more than 60 hours a week. There was a higher expectation to put in longer hours if you were young,
especially if you didn’t have a family... We had to work late regularly, for example my boss would say to me at 7pm, later in the evening I was to show up at a parking lot at midnight in [city] to do outreach or count cards and you would just have to do that and that’s basically how the whole summer was... Because of our age there was the assumption that we didn’t have any other personal commitments besides working. So we worked a lot. (Interview 13, Terri)

But, because you are a young person you don’t have kids, you don’t have a family life, you’re available to be on-call 24 hours a day. So, you really get taken advantage of. (Interview 10, Sue)

While very committed to organizing, the women voiced strong objection to work practices that ignore the importance of life beyond the workplace. Many identified with their feminine role wishing to become mothers and expressed frustration about not being able to continue organizing as a career because of inadequate labour movement policy on work-life balance. Several respondents said they quit organizing, or planned to leave, because of the long hours culture:

I found a lot of women left [more] than stayed – and that is one of the reasons I left. I’m getting to the stage in my relationship with my boyfriend and I am thinking of getting married and starting a family and I can’t organize. (Interview 12, Cher)

We’re [in the labour movement] still working out how you can maintain a family life. I still don’t see it... It’s not the kind of environment I want if I can help it for my family if I have one and I want one. Definitely having a child would end my career. (Interview 1, Sonia)

Most organizers recognized the extraordinary commitment required to balance union work alongside family responsibilities. The dedication necessary is evident in the description provided below by a woman who explained how she accommodated her schedule to meet the job requirements after having a baby:

I don’t know if he [supervisor] thought that if I had children I’d become unproductive. I’m committed to the cause you know? You send me out to [city] and I have to be there at 5 o’clock in the morning I will sleep at my mother’s house, I will bring my baby with me. I will leave my baby in the bed at 3:30 [a.m.] and I will get in the car. Go pick up who ever I have to (this happened on Monday/Tuesday) pick up. Get to [city] for 5 o’clock in the morning and not come home until 5 o’clock at night. I will do that! So they see this, and they think okay, “well she’s not just like the other ones. She’s committed, she’s okay we’ll let her in our Department.” (Interview 2, Gloria)
None of the other organizers interviewed said they would be willing or capable of adopting such a taxing schedule to meet parental and work responsibilities. In general, they placed a higher priority on maintaining their mental and physical health and on sustaining relationships outside paid work. As one organizer quipped, “people [organizers] realize an organizing job is not 9 to 5 but it is not 24/7” (Interview 3, Nancy).

**Union Organizing and Gendered Risk**

Risk taking is integral to masculine work and is a defining feature of working class culture (Paap, 2006; Braudy, 2011). Assuming risk in order to accomplish work tasks or to satisfy employers’ expectations is a defining characteristic of masculine union organizing culture. The union organizers in this study, some of whom worked as interns, spoke at length about exposure to legal, physical and personal safety risks while working on organizing campaigns. As an interviewee explains, at times, the dangers were unexpected, “The first campaign there was violence where we were leafleting and we were attacked by the workers” (Interview 5, Zena). They also felt they took extreme risks, often unnecessarily, for the sake of winning a unionization drive, “Sometimes you have to sneak into buildings because really that is the only way you get in and try to get into floors. I can’t count the number of times I have been chased off properties by security” (Interview 12, Cher). The women believed many risks were unwarranted and reported feeling vulnerable in numerous situations, but they also recognized it was an expectation of the job:

I remember working on one campaign and a staff person directed an intern to drive really fast, like 140km, to go get a camera and get back to the hotel where we were meeting. They actively encouraged people to do things that weren’t safe and that was just part of the culture. (Interview 13, Terri)

The first guy, he was [a] pretty good [intern] … I was told he basically tried to sue [the union] … He had just started and he was told to go dumpster diving [searching garbage dumpsters for employee information]. First he felt it was not ethical to go through company dumpsters and find people’s information. He was new and he was expected to go and do that and he felt picked on. (Interview 12, Cher)

Stealing company information from garbage bins, *i.e.*, dumpster diving, was explained as a common practice that was taught to interns even though it created considerable moral anxiety and concerns about the legality of their actions:

… it does sound terrible and I would steal a lot of stuff and I know we shouldn’t, and then there are fights about can management ask workers to steal stuff…(Interview 4, Fiona)
In the eyes of the organizers, an especially controversial and risky policy was the practice of conducting house visits alone at workers’ homes. A veteran organizer explained, “I must have done at least 500 house visits. We show up at the door largely by ourselves” (Interview 4, Fiona). The goal of house visits is to encourage workers to sign a union card. Organizers who are young and female are seen to have an advantage organizing because they appear less threatening to people (Interview 4, Fiona). However, conducting solo house visits was often incredibly distressing and anxiety producing for the young women organizers. A number of respondents recounted very intimidating, frightening, and even dangerous incidents during the course of house visits:

Sometimes when I was doing houses, there were some really like sketchy parts of the city. It was, oh my god, what am I doing here? But hindsight is always 20-20. Back then at the time it was all about getting the card ... But when I think about it, it was kind of dumb. Anything could have happened and no one would have known where I was. (Interview 12, Cher)

I have had an unfortunate experience of going to a worker’s house who is no longer an employee and having the gentleman, the man say to me, “why don’t you come sit on my bed, I’ll talk to you, why don’t you come sit on my bed.” And I say “no!” (Interview 4, Fiona)

In some instances, they felt their young age undermined their credibility, creating distressing situations during house calls:

You know, a 26 year-old woman who looks like she’s 19 sometimes? I think that people think they can take advantage of that. People can be condescending to me or patronizing me in a house visit. I find that the sons, the older sons, are checking out their mother or the husband, not the workers themselves, but always the husband of the woman I am visiting. They regard me in that fashion or treat me in that way. People are always … they see me as this young girl, not an adult or a young woman, but a young girl. It’s scary… It’s scary in the sense that there isn’t much you can do once you are inside someone’s home. They could be in a neighbourhood in [city], very clean, very middle-class, and you don’t know who’s on the other side of that door, you have no idea till you’re sitting in their house and you find out whether they are aggressive, violent, racist, homophobic, sexist, you have to deal with that awkwardness once you are in their house. (Interview 1, Sonia)

Organizers said that they complained to their managerial staff supervisors about their fears of doing organizing work alone. At one union, for example,
organizers opposed the organizing alone policy as unsafe work – directly and fiercely confronting this policy, they attempted to negotiate a provision in their collective agreement that would require house visits to be conducted by two people:

We even tried to negotiate it in the last round of negotiations as an article [in the collective agreement] that we would be out [conducting house visits] as pairs. They [the employer] just refused. There was absolutely no way. If and when it is possible [to organize in pairs] it’s at the discretion of the employer. If you don’t feel safe, and this is what I was told, “if you don’t feel safe when you get up to the house or into the neighbourhood just don’t do the house visit.” There isn’t supposed to be any retaliation or any prejudice against you for doing something like that. And, I was told we give you guys [women and men organizers] cell phones - use your cell phone if you are in danger. I remember thinking to myself and saying, “excuse me, do you mind not raping me for one second so that I can call my employer and tell them that I am being raped?” (Interview 1, Sonia)

The organizers held firm to their bargaining position demanding they do house visitations in pairs, as this respondent explains, “This exploded at the [union] to the point where [the employer negotiator] and I were yelling across the [bargaining] table about health and safety issues” (Interview 4, Fiona). The union representing the organizers engaged in strike action but their employer refused the ‘pairs’ demand justifying the practice of working alone as a needed cost-saving measure. Moreover, the employer defended the policy by questioning the organizers’ commitment to unionizing asking, “are you committed?” (Interview 4, Fiona). The suggestion that they were disloyal ‘to the cause’ infuriated the organizers. They believed the employer’s response completely ignored their fears of sexual assault and any other safety risks they faced.

Women organizers regularly confronted sexual harassment, particularly in male predominant workplace. Even though harassment did not generate the same deep fears about their personal safety as conducting solo house visits, women organizers expressed profound frustration about the gendered and sexualized responses from men. These attitudes and behaviours made them feel that they were not taken seriously or ignored in their attempts to engage with them intellectually about unionization:

But the biggest challenge doing organizing is not necessarily around people being violent or aggressive but it’s more the sexual inequalities in society. What I find comes up time and time again when I’m organizing is that men don’t listen to me – and not necessarily jumping on me [to say that] you’re wrong you don’t know what you’re talking
about but more just looking past at what I have to say and at me as a sexual being and like I have been asked numerous times when I go out to organize after I have said my little piece and asked how do you feel or what do you feel is wrong with your working environment? And the first thing they say is do you have a boyfriend or what are you doing on Friday night? ... I remember one time going out and before I even said two words this guy asked me if I would marry him. (Interview 3, Nancy)

Several of the respondents commented that pairing with a male produced better results with respect to card signing, either during house visits or at work sites:

Men responded much better to men. I was teamed up with a man at one point, on one of the days of the weekend. And, I found the men responded much better. (Interview 1, Sonia)

In spite of the perceived benefits seen by some of the interviewees, a factor that pushed organizers away from the ‘pairs policy’ was a competitive union culture and a managerial approach that rewarded organizers individually for their success in campaigning:

My preference is to always do house-calls in pairs but ... sometimes because it was a bit competitive, the culture at the [union], my colleagues wouldn’t want me to be paired up with them because the way you earn your stripes is through how many cards you get signed or how many campaigns result in a successful certification, so you were very much rewarded or recognized by how much you produce and not the quality of your work and efforts. (Interview 10, Sue)

Organizational class hierarchies: gender, race and age dimensions

Labour Leadership

Union memberships in Canada are diversified by gender, race, and other categories of social difference. It is understood by most labour movement organizations that the labour leadership (union officials, staff) should reflect that diversity. Numerous policy documents are available stating support for equity initiatives and argue the needs and concerns of all workers can only be addressed with support by a diverse labour leadership (CLC, 1997; 2004; 2011; OFL, 2012). Yet the respondents, without exception, noted the existence of a predominantly white and male majority leadership in the labour organizations in which they worked, “Everyone in management were white and everyone on staff were white – even on [administrative] staff” (Interview 5, Zena). Many of the women discussed
the presence of what they called “the old school,” characterized as white, often male and middle-aged (or older) leadership. They critiqued the existing leadership for not understanding, or having lost touch with, the needs of union memberships comprised mainly of women and racialized (often immigrant) workers:

The leaders are white and in my world people are related to workers’ rights but once they become leaders not anymore, they lost the connection so they don’t know what the workers want anymore, and they don’t want to know either. They just want to keep their power and they fight with each other to keep their power. In my union lots of leaders are female but they are white and old-school, nothing that reflects the actual membership itself. (Interview 6, Barb)

Gender most definitely, the ratio of male to female [is not representative]. Even with the [union] which was most of their members are in healthcare. Most healthcare workers are women, most services workers are women. But you go to the conventions or training or whatever the majority are male. You wonder why? People of colour – there are a lot less… It [leaders and union representatives] is not reflective of the workforce at all. (Interview 12, Cher)

They further perceived ‘whiteness’ as a necessary criterion to moving up the organizational hierarchy, in achieving supervisory positions or promotions. A young, racialized, female organizer believed the established male leadership felt deeply threatened by “radical” youth labour politics. She stated that a few male members of the executive at her organization applied intimidation tactics, including harsh criticisms and reprimands, to oppose her youth organizing work:

Young people like myself and _____, we worked really closely and she was the Youth Rep at the time. They did not want to be challenged by young women of colour and every barrier was “you’re young, you’re a woman, you’re a person of colour,” it was a real threat to the old-boys institution…. And those were really hard times for me, you go through these phases where you feel super silenced and oppressed and angry….just like, “why are you threatened by me?” (Interview 9, Angie)

Another organizer echoed the sentiment that youth tested the authority of the leadership:

I noticed that young workers in the labour movement can be classified as “mouthy” because there is this kind of new generation of young activists that are really, really educated, and certainly
privileged, and they happen to be young workers of colour and a lot are women. And they won’t take the crap that some young workers might or even some older workers might. (Interview 3, Nancy)

The challenges posed by the youth organizers did not stand them in good stead for promotion within the movement as this organizer commented:

I know some people who have been blacklisted, if you challenge leadership you can get your wings clipped, and some have spoken out about this [frustration] or have gone away because they’re so angry with the process, not only in their union but in others as well, so they just leave. (Interview 10, Sue)

Those who were most accepted within the ranks of the bureaucracy were described as, “just mini versions of the same old guys reproducing the same problems” (Interview 9, Angie). Even when it was recognized that the labour movement attempted to diversify the end result was to reinforce existing gendered and racialized leadership structures:

The labour movement has recruited a lot of young diverse people, but the ones who are being groomed to take on leadership positions are mostly white and mostly men. There’s very little focus on rank and file development. (Interview 13, Terri)

Recruitment: Gender and race representation

As mentioned, labour movement organizations have endorsed diversity in policy documents and many unions have made concerted efforts to implement equity initiatives to diversify their union staff. Youth programs are an example of this approach to revitalize unions and thus represent a change project (Acker, 2006). The organizers were aware at the time of their internship or hiring that they were being recruited as young people to re-energize unions. In this sense there was a premium placed on youth. A few organizers thought they were recruited because of their gender and race or ethnic identity. Racial or gender recruitment was sometimes positively applied in organizing in that unions attempted to hire organizers that reflected the target groups they were trying to organize. One respondent said she was sent to the United States to assist with organizing because she speaks fluent Spanish. She goes on to say:

I think they [union] were trying to build an identity and build their organizing department and they knew they had to hire a certain demographic. The majority of their membership are women and women of colour so they definitely they had a quota they were trying to fill, an official quota they had to fill. (Interview 1, Sonia)
Some of the organizers, though, expressed deep cynicism about the diversity recruitment policy of unions and the work assigned to youth organizers:

Either they [labour unions] are hiring youth and there’s no type of diversity – not even a thought that we need to get a diversified workforce to reflect our communities. Or, they’re only hiring young people of colour because that’s what people are expecting now. It’s like a PR thing. It’s not that they sincerely or fundamentally believe with anti-racism work and that it’s in all of the work that they do but they will hire young people of colour specifically to organize workplaces of people of colour and then they are done. (Interview 3, Nancy)

A few of the women interviewed said they thought racialized stereotypes informed their supervisors’ decisions as to which campaigns and workers they were assigned to organize:

If you’re a person of colour or a woman, there’s a weird dynamic where you’re expected to work on certain campaigns if the workers are say predominately black or female and if you fit that identity then you’re assigned to the campaign. (Interview 13, Terri)

Mostly I think it was a use type of relationship… I was sent to [province] … and I got sent to organize people in the kitchens and housekeeping, cause those are mostly people of colour. I felt more or less it was a use relationship. But with time I could show that I could organize people of colour as well as people that were not. If I am able to have the conversation and pick up on what the issues are then I could just as well get almost anyone to sign a card if I was given that opportunity. But it started off as “oh, we have a black organizer and she is a woman too and she is young. She’s straight from the university – this is great. If only you could speak Tamil now – we got into a campaign with a lot Sri Lankan people -- if only you could speak Tamil that would be perfect.” (Interview 12, Cher)

Some of the organizers found they were mismatched between the workers they were trying to unionize and their own cultural background and racial identity. As this respondent explains:

It was hard for me because most of the workers are men and they brought me in to try to talk to the black workers. I guess because I’m a black woman I get lumped in with being West Indian and I’m not of West Indian descent and most of the men that worked there were
of West Indian descent and they were older. So, culturally even though we are people of African descent we had very different cultural experiences and generalizing West Indian men, they’re not going to let a young black women tell them what to do. It’s just not going to happen. (Interview 3, Nancy)

Another organizer said that in one campaign, “the majority of people [being organized] were Punjabi – if they really wanted to hire people they should have hired Punjabi speakers. None of us were Punjabi speakers” (Interview 5, Zena).

Training
Although one organizer said she received adequate training, the remainder of the respondents stated they received little training, and the training they did receive was not adequate to the realities they encountered organizing, “The training prepared me for nothing” (Interview 1 Sonia); “I received absolutely no training... in fact, the words ‘sink or swim’ come to mind” (Interview 14, Laura). Unlike the U.S., where newly recruited union organizers typically undergo an intensive three-month apprenticeship (Feekin and Widenor, 2003, p. 66), the women interviewed for this study said many organizers learned in the field.

I would see my colleagues come in and be expected to work on the campaign with very little training...maybe they would do one house call, knock on the door one evening, and get trained that way but otherwise you were just expected to go out and do it. (Interview 10, Sue)

Understaffing and minimal resources allocated for organizing was often cited as reasons for the lack of training. The organizers who worked as stewards, or in other internal union positions, said they too received almost no training, “When I started, I’m a young person, I got handed a book and told to fill out a membership card, told I worked for the union now and I got every second Friday off and that was basically it” (Interview 7, Judy).

Although most organizers said formal training was inadequate, quite a few spoke about being mentored. They maintained they would not have been able to do their work or even survive without the helpful support of a mentor:

When I first started it was a pretty steep learning curve and for training there was a workshop set up over a weekend that we had to attend but mostly it happens through mentorship. People in the union will take you under their wing and try to make you feel comfortable and give you information... (Interview 8, Lynn).
Several organizers valued mentorship from women who were feminists and role models. One of the respondents spoke about her mentoring by, “these amazing feminist, activist women in the labour movement.” She explained that her mentor “was phenomenal,” she’s like my ‘labour movement Mom’, we had a really tight relationship so I felt safe in that sense and protected by her” (Interview 9, Angie).

Wage and age
Contrary to the experience of many interns in today’s labour market (Perlin, 2012), the level of wages and salary paid was not at issue for the majority of the organizers. Many stated that the pay was higher than what could be expected for persons in their age group, and was well above what they earned in previous jobs often in service occupations.

At that time, going from, … very close to minimum wage … I was making like $6 something per hour serving table plus tips so jumping from that to $850/week was a lot of money so I was really excited about making money because I was getting letters from the student loan centre and I was really excited about doing meaningful, important work and getting paid for it. And I was kind of naïve about it because it was my first real full-time job and coming from the service sector (all my previous work was restaurant or retail) … so jumping from that to a salary I was astonished thinking, “what am I going to do with all that money?” So I didn’t question it. (Interview 10, Sue)

However, once the respondents began to consciously reflect on their pay they noted it was not extraordinary, relative to union wages, or the long hours and skill involved: “I was 22 when I started and making $40,000 a year seemed pretty good if you think about what people make in comparison. Now, in the labour movement - I don’t know, maybe I was underpaid…” (Interview 12, Angie); “Yes, at the time for me it was fair, now when I look back…it was an organizers rate which is a really low wage, but because I always made a really low wage, I had no comparison” (Interview 11, Marie). A few organizers complained about precarious contract employment and the lack of commitment by the labour movement to hiring young people. One organizer explained that stereotypes about young people justified lower remuneration, “And they tell me you don’t have the experience or they give me the indirect sense of what does a young person need with benefits?” (Interview 3, Nancy).

Informal interactions while ‘doing the work’
Informal interactions in labour movement work are complex. It is not possible to identify all of the subtleties or nuances mediated by the masculine hierarchical structure of labour organizations discussed in the interviews by the organizers. In general, the women expressed that the
male work environment was not conducive to more cooperative styles of work, “Young women in the labour movement are surrounded by alpha males. It is not comfortable or supportive” (Interview 14, Laura). For the most part, the women did not identify with the competitive values or admiration associated with the ‘intrepid male’ organizer:

There is definitely a macho attitude there -- who can work the longest without sleep, who can work the longest without doing their laundry? It’s really perverse. Like, “I haven’t eaten in two days because I’ve been so busy.” Comments like that come out of the mouths of organizers. … I think personally, men do it more. Because quite frankly I’d think, “what are you stupid? Go eat something!” That doesn’t tell me you’re a good organizer, it tells me you’re just disheveled and you’ve worked hard and you’re tired. (Interview 14, Laura)

In spite of the presence of a masculine culture and the value placed on masculine attributes associated with the organizer position, the work of organizers is not given high status within unions:

It’s funny I have worked in the labour movement as an organizer for quite sometime, but it wasn’t until I got into the education department that I was congratulated and treated like a full fledged union rep. It’s as though organizing is seen as entry level and that posting out is finally making it in the labour movement. (Interview 14, Laura)

This undervaluation is seen as partly responsible for the high turnover rate of organizers (Feekin and Widenor, 2003 p. 81; Rooks, 2004), “The average organizer [work lifespan is] anywhere from 6 to 18 months, depending [on the circumstances]” (Interview 1, Sonia). A veteran field organizer is generally recognized as someone who has worked two years (Foerster, 2003, p. 24; Crain, 1994, p. 240). In this sense, the job of organizer is often recognized as an ideal entry position for young activists and might explain why many youth internships are established in the organizing departments of unions.

Discussion

The intersecting gender, race, and age identities of the organizers clearly informed their work experiences in the labour movement. Age identity, a category of difference that is often under examined in the feminist intersectionality literature, is specifically pronounced in the interview findings. The organizers’ age intersected with their gender and racial identity to create systemic disadvantage and unfavourable experiences organizing. The hegemonic masculine values of individualism, competition, risk-taking, and total commitment to the paid job embedded in the union organizing culture - combined with their age - deepened and reinforced
systematic inequalities for the young women organizers. In short, the young women experienced greater vulnerabilities organizing because of their age.

Acker’s inequality regimes analysis is applicable here in that the ‘general requirements of work’ component comprising white masculine work practices elucidate the type of organizational processes creating the greatest difficulties for the organizers. The notion of total commitment to the paid job is a key aspect of the masculine organizational model, according to Acker, because it supports, “successful claims of non-responsibility for human reproduction,” including marginalizing caring and reproductive activities (2006a, p. 94). Franzway and Fonow (2011) build on the idea of non-responsibility for reproduction in their analysis of feminist union activists. The authors argue trade unions ignore the ‘labouring body’, a concept referring to the bodily needs of self-care (reproducing physical and emotional needs) necessary to being a functional and healthy worker. Women union activists, they argue, are particularly vulnerable to overwork because they must engage in self-care without the help of others, and without accommodation for work/life balance provided by the labour organizations in which they work. The women organizers interviewed for this study understood the implications of unlimited work demands on their ‘labouring bodies’, and completely begrudged how the heroics of organizing placed them in unsafe situations, corroded their personal relationships, undermined their physical and emotional health, and ultimately contributed to burnout and the loss of experienced organizers needed for labour movement revitalization.

The general expectation by employers that the organizers fit their life around the demands of the job was repeatedly stated and was starkly illustrated in the case of the new mother organizer who began her day at 3:30 a.m. to make it on time to meetings, and was demonstrated by the intern who was asked by her supervisor to meet up in a parking lot at midnight to count union cards. Employer expectations concerning exclusive commitment to organizing were amplified by the respondents’ age. The women frequently stated that their employer justified intensified work practices, such as extending their work time, by referring to their youth and corresponding single status. For the organizers, a big bone of contention was the perception held by their employers that their young age meant they were free of any responsibilities outside of work. Age increased safety risks as was shown in the examples of solo house visits. As the women themselves understood, the risks they experienced as union organizers correlated with their unequal and subordinate status within a sexist society. Age intersected with their gender, infantilizing the women and as one of the organizers explained, she was patronized and treated like a young girl. At the same time, they were highly sexualized in the eyes of male workers completely undermining their attempts to bring forward the union message. The organizers’ youthfulness exaggerated their overall
feelings of disrespect, while their gendered age identity deepened their vulnerabilities to physical or sexual dangers such as bodily or sexual assault, and gender and sexual harassment. The valorization of risk-taking and individualism embedded in union policy and practices (work rules) disavows youth and female gendered risk. Conventional union organizing practices encourage working alone and promote competition between organizers and inhibits teamwork - all of which can jeopardize organizers safety, as seen in the practice of solo house visits. Limited training, or the complete absence of training, also assumes individual initiative and self-reliance. In general, the organizers believed their employer was insensitive to the gender-specific dimensions of union organizing. This indifference was clearly apparent when union management refused to adopt the ‘pairs house calling’ policy, rejecting their demand to uphold the right to refuse unsafe work. These policies remain in place despite severe consequences such as the high quit rate of organizers, the fear that women organizers may experience, and the potential risk of sexual assault.

The organizers’ racial identity created contradictory dynamics in unionizing. As union management realized, certain racialized identities can facilitate organizing but racialized difference, as was discussed, can also produce differential treatment. Racial stereotypes sometimes informed management decisions about work assignments that some organizers said made them feel used, and undervalued their organizing skills. Moreover, racial stereotyping blurred and homogenized understanding of racial groups thereby ignoring interracial diversity between workers and organizers. The women’s age combined with their gender, and race identities to undercut their authority as organizers, further illustrates the complexity of intersectional disadvantage.

Age devaluing was evident in labour policy that recruited youth to union organizing positions. The job of union organizer is a highly responsible and demanding position, and absolutely necessary to union survival and renewal, but it is situated at the low end of the labour status hierarchy. It may be that the normatively feminine service and interpersonal aspects of the organizer position contribute to its lower status. Organizing departments are notoriously under resourced and under staffed, making the work conditions of organizers onerous and the job less desirable (Rooks, 2002, p. 19; Crain, 1994, p. 240). In spite of these conditions, the young organizers interviewed conveyed an incredibly strong commitment to organizing and expressed a political drive to pursue social justice politics. It is likely that the eagerness of youth to commit to union politics, coupled with the (ageist) assumption that young people are free of family responsibilities, provided the perfect match for recruiting youth interns. However, these factors also made them susceptible to the heavy work demands and their willingness perhaps to accept relatively low pay rates (Foerster, 2003, p.14).
Class and gender ordering was evident in the general observation held by a number of respondents that the established labour leadership promoted young white males over women. The interviews suggest that labour leaders and management staff devalued the work and political experience of the women youth organizers. By equating youth synonymously with lack of experience and pointing to their “radical” race and gender politics, the leadership justified blocking their promotion to leadership roles. This issue of oppositional politics between leaders and youth interns based on issues of identity and diversity, mirrors the developments at the Organizing Institute in the U.S., understood as, “a generational clash between old activists and the new” (Foerster, 2003, p. 18; p. 25); and in Australia where young women trainees in the Organising Works program challenged the masculine language and union culture, described by Sally McManus as “a culture shock” to the union movement (1997, p. 37). Similarly, Linda Briskin notes a generational divide in perceptions of union leadership with younger labour activists (i.e., those under 35 years of age) identifying with a “postheroic” style of leadership that emphasizes collective over individual leadership, teamwork, and power sharing that is supported by organizational social processes in organizational practice (2011, pp. 519-520). The respondents in this study valued cooperative styles of working such as pairing-up to do house visits, mentoring, and structuring organizing in ways that allow for greater support of organizers such as permitting time for breaks away from long campaigns.

In sum, the respondents believed their age was an important factor contributing to the excessive work demands, while their identity as young women increased their vulnerability to gender-specific risks during organizing. The experiences of many respondents as organizers within existing union structures and hierarchies reveal how race, gender and age combined to problematize their position and legitimacy as union organizers. The interview findings, then, reveal an intersectional standpoint that shed light on the experiences of marginalized subjects in labour organizations.

**Conclusion**

Youth programs were established: to renew and diversify labour leadership and union staff; to revitalize unions by mobilizing greater youth participation; and, to expand union memberships through effective union organizing. The former two objectives were partially achieved as youth participation was expanded, at least in the nineties, and serious attempts were made to unionize youth predominant labour market sectors. But the goal of diversifying labour leadership has never been met (Das Gupta, 2007; CLC, 2011; OFL, 2012). Diversifying leadership is necessary if unions are going to develop new ideas and strategies to connect with, and address, the concerns of younger generations of workers facing labour market challenges such as growing precariousness and income insecurity. If organized labour
in Canada is to attract new and younger members, it will be necessary to revise labour movement policy. Youth are not a homogeneous identity category and greater attention needs to be paid to gender, race, and other categories of social difference. As one of the respondents observed, “There is no critical analysis of youth as an equity group… labour doesn’t have an integrated understanding of oppression and equity” (Interview 4, Fiona). While recognizing that the issue of labour leadership is very important, the equity agenda must move beyond issues of representation (Bentham, 2007); it involves removing inequities that minorities and women face on a daily basis at the workplace and in unions. As Barb Thomas explains:

Few Canadian unionists would argue [against the view] that the demographics of the Canadian workforce is multi-racial and diverse; that the next wave of leadership needs to reflect the workforce; that organizing and mobilizing young workers is key; in short that building a powerful worker and social movement must have an equity agenda. We agree on the big ideas. We face challenges in the daily default to inequity in our workplaces and unions. (Thomas cited in Carol Wall, 2009, p. 82)

This study contributes to greater understanding of the “daily default to inequity” that youth organizers face in the labour movement in Canada. If the movement is to survive, it will be necessary to continue to attract and retain ideologically committed young people with diverse backgrounds. This goal will only be achieved when labour begins to accept the challenges posed by young people - like the young women in this study – who bring much needed energy and support to labour movement organizing.

Notes
1. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) defines youth as under the age of 30 years. The federation represents approximately 3.5 million union members.
2. According to one of the respondents at the time of our interview (Interview, Gloria), the age threshold for youth was 27 years at the Canadian Labour Congress; at the Ontario Federation of Labour it was 30 and at the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions it was 35. In some unions youth is classified relative to the average age of workers in a specific sector or industry. Many professional public sector workers begin their working careers later in life and the unions representing them define youth in relation to their junior membership that is often older than 24 years. For example, the public sector union PIPSC representing scientists and professionals define youth as members under the age 35. In the university sector, academics are often much older than 24 and a junior academic caucus can have members who are in late middle age (40s and 50s).
3. A range and variety of youth representative structures operate in Labour Federations and in unions. A review of union youth programs surveyed (website) by the author in 2009-10 confirmed youth committees at the CLC, and provincial labour federations in Quebec (FTQ), Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, and Newfoundland. In Saskatchewan a constitutional provision requires youth representative delegates at conventions, the Ontario Federation of Labour and New Brunswick Federation of Labour established youth representation on their Executive Committees. Active unions sponsoring youth programs included the United Food and Commercial Workers, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and UNIFOR, formerly Canadian Energy Paper Workers Union and the CAW.

4. The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) negotiated a Memorandum of Agreement with at least one employer allowing student placements while not reducing or eliminating bargaining unit work for unionized workers.

5. In 2011 the CLC held an "open meeting" the day before its convention in Vancouver. 75 young people attended with guest speakers and discussion among the attendees. This is the closest event to a youth conference sponsored by the CLC since 2003.

6. Methodology is broadly defined by Leslie McCall: “Ideally, a methodology is a coherent set of ideas about the philosophy, methods, and data that underlie the research process and the production of knowledge” (McCall, 2005, p. 1774). While recognizing that some labour studies scholars address intersectional difference, they typically do not articulate a well-defined methodology.

7. Labour Studies is an interdisciplinary field that draws on a range of disciplines such as history, law, economics and sociology to study the world of work including paid employment in the labour market and unpaid work within the sphere of social reproduction. It is often contrasted with Industrial Relations (IR) that is considered to be more narrowly focused on the institutions and actors in the labour relations system.

8. Research has focused on women union organizers and the importance of gender identity and gender-specific approaches to organizing, particularly in feminized sectors of the economy (see: Crain, 1994; McManus, 1997; Yates, 2006) but studies of the traditionally masculine union organizing culture in the labour movement are hard to find. Daisy Rooks (2003) is an exception.

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