

**S**oviet women's lives. What are their working conditions? How have *glasnost* and *perestroika* affected them? What shape does their literature take? How do the Soviets approach the idea of women's equality? In this issue, writers from both the West and the USSR attempt to answer these and a host of other questions.

In many ways, this has been one of the most difficult issues *CWS/cf* has done. Distance, cultural differences, language barriers, the size and diversity of the Soviet Union, government bureaucracy on both sides and a political climate in tremendous flux complicated our task. As these societies undergo historical upheaval, it is difficult for us in Canada to assess all the implications of current events in the USSR.

Some respected Canadian feminists told us, in no uncertain terms, that we must not do this issue, as it would help legitimate a system in which basic freedoms are denied, especially to Jews, Ukrainians and other ethnic minorities. Many Canadians live here because they or their families fled persecution in what is now the USSR. We struggled to avoid cold war categories; to present a balanced critical assessment.

For Canadian feminists, the Soviet Union has been an enigma. The victory of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 led to the development of the first modern state to take Marxism as its political framework and attempt to build a society reflecting Marxist ideals. Consonant with Engels' analysis of male/female relations, the emancipation of women was placed on the political agenda. The USSR was the first country to enshrine formal equality for women in its constitution, at a time when women in other countries were still fighting for the vote. The state enacted laws and designed social programs aimed at creating a society in which women

would indeed have equality. The post-revolutionary society offered women, in all republics of the Soviet Union, opportunities previously undreamed of.

As a predominantly peasant, patriarchal and undeveloped society, the distance traveled in achieving more equality for

women was immense. In 1908, 99 percent of Russian women had no education beyond the primary school level. In several of the Asian republics, women could still be sold into slavery. Despite the civil war, foreign invasion, the devastation of World War II and the bitter hardship of the Stalin years, new educational and work practices for women were established. Today, just three generations later, Soviet society takes for granted that women should be highly educated, involved in professions and active in the public sphere.

The Soviet system, however, is also equated with a particularly hard life for women. The effects of domestic scarcity, cumbersome bureaucracy, lack of household amenities and cramped housing all fall most heavily on the shoulders of women. Our supermarkets are a Soviet woman's idea of nirvana, and the USSR looks to the West for ideas on how to improve production and distribution.

Western feminists note that, however imperfectly implemented, the Soviet Union has social welfare policies and social services that we consider essential for women's equality. Here in Canada, improvements in social services, such as daycare and maternity leave, have been won in times of economic prosperity, when profits were high and there was a demand for women's labour force participation. Now, under the neoconservative agenda, social programs are identified as something we can't afford. In the Soviet Union, despite a more serious economic crisis, they are increasing social services such as daycare and maternity leave. Why can they afford such measures, while we in the affluent West cannot?

When we look to the USSR, we realize that many of the rights Canadian feminists are fighting hardest for, such as

access to free and legal abortion and economic independence, have been guaranteed to Soviet women for years. Yet, they have not achieved full equality. Clearly, such goals are not enough. Why has Soviet socialism failed to eliminate women's subordination? What else do women in the West and in the East need to fight for?



From Left: Ester Reiter (2nd), Ludmila Enlutina (3rd), Meg Luxton (5th), Shelagh Wilkinson (7th) with representatives of Women's Councils in Romanechty

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