

A LOOK AT THE CLEANING INDUSTRY...

Wendy Iler

Tous les soirs des milliers de nettoyeurs, des femmes immigrées pour la plupart, nettoient les bureaux vides des édifices publics et commerciaux. Elles sont mal rémunérées et souffrent souvent du dos et de réactions adverses aux produits de nettoyage. Même si ces travailleuses réussissent à se syndiquer, elles n'obtiennent pas une sécurité d'emploi entière puisqu'elles ont affaire à une agence de placement pour employés de maison et non pas au propriétaire de l'édifice ou au gérant. Une fois le contrat terminé, ces femmes de ménage perdent souvent leur emploi et leurs droits syndicaux. La Commission du travail québécoise a récemment décrété qu'une convention collective s'appliquait aux nouvelles agences de placement pour employés de maison, mais ces travailleurs ont besoin d'autre sécurité d'emploi et d'une rémunération plus juste.

If you live in a city, try some evening to count all the lit-up buildings — public, office, and commercial. In every thousand or so square feet of floor space there's a cleaner who is working. In Toronto this number adds up to thousands of cleaners, most of them immigrant women.

These women, often starting at 6 p.m., work a part-time evening shift

of three to six hours a day, spread over a five-day week. Their job duties include the emptying and cleaning of wastepaper baskets and ashtrays, vacuuming, dusting, polishing chrome, and cleaning washrooms.

The women are usually assigned to clean a particular floor. Some women have already spent the day cleaning private homes; others have worked the day shift in an office or store or spent the day at home with small children.

There are also male cleaners, who generally work full time. They work mostly in the public areas of a building, cleaning terrazzo floors, sometimes washing windows, and removing snow or gardening according to season.

The deserted floors make a lonely workplace. Cleaners often work in isolation, alone except for encounters on the elevator or at breaktime — if there's time for a break. I know a woman who spent the night in a closet she accidentally shut on herself; no one heard her cries.

Light — or the lack of it — is a problem. Increased energy costs make it no longer feasible to leave buildings lit up all night. Lights are kept off as much as possible, with

the result that cleaners sometimes find themselves in the dark. It's not a matter of a simple flick of the switch to get light when the lighting is controlled from central switching somewhere in the bowels of the building. The cleaner may phone downstairs, depending on the type of building and the fluency of her English; more likely she must find her way through the darkened work area to look for a supervisor or security guard.

Language differences can be a problem in other situations. In one large building the union was concerned about fire-evacuation procedures for cleaners and asked that bilingual (English-Portuguese) messages be prepared for broadcast over the loudspeaker system. The building owner opposed the project on the grounds that recordings in a "foreign" language might offend the tenants.

In Toronto, cleaners are mostly Azorean Portuguese, though the Greek, Italian, Latin American, West Indian, and eastern European communities are also represented. The women are usually paid close to the minimum wage, the men a little more than that. There are few, if any, benefits for workers. In fact,

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liabilities are common. Back injuries occur frequently. Sometimes cleaning products cause dizziness, vomiting, or dermatitis.

The cleaning bosses are not the insurance company, bank, or shopping plaza whose name is emblazoned on the door. Rather they are cleaning contractors who bid, with varying degrees of formality, for a cleaning contract with the owner or manager of the building.

An ever-increasing workload is a common complaint among cleaners. Contract cleaners bid low to get the job, then ensure a profit for themselves by reducing labour cost. A worker is given another couple of washrooms to clean, a stairwell to scrub. All the work must be completed in the scheduled time, of course, or the cleaner must stay late without overtime pay.

In some cases cleaning contracts are subcontracted to individuals or small-time operators. The contractor pockets a portion of the cost of the contract, thus decreasing what was already the lowest tender for the job. The result may well be that the time required to complete the job puts those doing it (often the subcontractor and his or her family) below the minimum wage.

Some cleaners have organized, but not without some problems peculiar to the industry. The scare story most heard during a union campaign goes like this: "the company will lose the contract and everyone will be out on the street." Unfortunately this line is not all bluff. Cleaning contracts can usually be terminated on thirty days' notice. Termination means the loss of employment and bargaining rights; the laws that protect workers' rights in a sale of an employer's business do not apply to a change of cleaning contractors.

The contractual relationship means that even when they are unionized, cleaners do not have full job security. Government cleaning jobs are generally formally tendered every two or three years, and there is often a new employer each time. Arrangements in the private sector are less formal. The scenario in collective bargaining goes like this:

Employer (literally passing the buck): "We can't give you any more raise than this. What we are offering you is all the building owner will give us."

Union: "It's not enough. We'll have to strike."

Employer (shedding crocodile

tears): "Go ahead . . . the building owner/manager will cancel the contract and we'll all be without jobs."

Workers can only keep their job and their union in these situations by mounting a public campaign; there is no protection under the law.

Some encouraging news comes from Quebec, where the provincial labour board recently decided that a cleaners' collective agreement did apply to a new cleaning contractor. There are also Quebec decrees that have set cleaners' salaries at more than the minimum wage.

Much remains to be done, however. Labour legislation must be changed to protect the rights of cleaners when the cleaning contractor changes. When the situation is possible, cleaners working for a contractor should attempt to become employees of the actual building owner, manager, or government entity. Subcontracting practices should be examined and regulated. Finally, the "light" and "heavy" cleaner categories should be dealt with as the sexual stereotyping they so thinly veil.

Just try to count all those lit-up windows some evening, and you'll see how much remains to be done.