



*FOR BREAD AND ROSES.
FOR JOBS AND JUSTICE.
THE CROSS-CANADA WOMEN'S
MARCH AGAINST POVERTY*



Tens of thousands of women carried, kilometre by kilometre, across Canada 15 demands for a fairer future – for women and all Canadians.

On May 15 delegates to the Canadian Labour Congress Convention in Vancouver donned their specially-designed purple baseball caps and T-shirts and headed for the streets to kick-off the Women's March Against Poverty. Once outside they were joined by more Marchers with more banners and balloons and more labour and community women spoke, sang, and celebrated this important protest against poverty.

During her send-off speech, Sunera Thobani, president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) called it an historic moment. "This March will solidify the links between the women's movement and the labour movement and that is a link which will serve us well in the years to come," she added.

"It is the democratic responsibility of people to take to the streets and to say that we will hold our governments responsible. We have a much, much better world to build. Women know this!"

Nancy Riche, CLC executive vice-president said it was great to see such a large "sea of purple". "We will raise the issue of poverty – we will do it in the streets, we will do it with noise, we will do it with our voices, and we will do it with our feet," she emphasized.

The East Coast cross-country caravan started in St. John's on May 19. Something Alliance member Debbie Graham, Union of National Defence Employees Local 90103, discovered was actually how much poverty there is out there.

"When we stopped in Summerside on our way through P.E.I. we learned that there are approximately 15,000 people in the province living in poverty. We left a can at every stop asking everyone to put a loonie in it. Our goal was to collect 15,000 loonies that could be used for child care to assist those people in finding jobs in the province."

At New Glasgow, N.S., the caravan set up a soup kitchen across the street from Member of Parliament Roseanne Skoke's office. "We felt it was a good opportunity to remind her of the poverty issue," adds Graham.

The eastern caravan arrived in Quebec City on June 1 and joined a 24-hour vigil at the National Assembly organized by the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) to commemorate the anniversary of the Quebec Bread and Roses March. Close to 10,000 women participated in the events in Quebec.

On May 23, hundreds of Edmontonians joined the western caravan. They marched from City Hall to Giovanni Caboto park where 1,500 enjoyed food, speeches and entertainment.

As the western caravan made its way through Manitoba, Brandon women planted rose bushes in a local park and held a community picnic. In Eli, a group of seniors invited the women to a potluck. And, in Winnipeg, representatives of the caravan attended a meeting of federal and provincial Ministers responsible for the Status of Women. The Ministers endorsed the March and were pressed to officially endorse the March demands.

On Sunday, June 8, the east and west met in Toronto to demonstrate their displeasure with the cost-cutting policies of the Harris government. That weekend was the first anniversary of the election of the Ontario Conservative provincial government.

And then a week later, after passing through several towns and cities on the way, the eastern and western caravans arrived in Ottawa.

On Saturday, June 15 some 25,000 people gathered in LeBreton Flats and marched in a throng to Parliament Hill.

"The most exciting moment of the day was when I arrived just inside Parliament Hill and I received the message that the marchers were leaving LeBreton Flats," says Christine Collins, president of Union of Canadian Transport Employees Local 70703 and Site Co-ordinator for LeBreton Flats. "When I looked down the line of marchers all I could see was a solid line from LeBreton to the Hill of women wearing their purple hats and T-shirts."

"This has been a truly incredible experience. It shows women across Canada have had enough. Even women who couldn't attend sent messages with the caravans as they travelled across the country. They are leading the way in fighting back against the attacks on the poor.

"This was truly an inclusive event and also one of the first times that the labour movement and community groups, students, women's groups, poverty groups and representatives from various cultures were working together for one common goal."

On Friday, June 14, under the tents at LeBreton Flats, more than 5,000 Alliance members and staff packed the National Capital Region tent to take part in various workshops. One of the workshops was on direct action. "We have had our first follow-up on this workshop," adds Collins. "On Thursday, June 20 more than 400 Alliance members in the NCR held a noon-hour pay equity demo. We expect to see a lot more of this type of action."

Under the Union Sisters tent there were all sorts of crafts being created and the Regional Women's Committee was busy working on the quilt for the National Women's Conference to be held in November. As well, in support of the occupation of the Halifax Canada Employment Centre on Gottingen Street by members of the community and PSAC members, sweatshirts, t-shirts and buttons were sold.