

First Fully Funded Maternity Leave: 1974



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UBC Clerical and Library Workers Lead the Way for Maternity Benefits

In 1974, years before other Canadian unions won maternity leave benefits in collective agreements, the Association of University & College Employees (AUCE) Local 1 at the University of BC (UBC) made history. In its first collective agreement, UBC clerical and library workers achieved contract language that provided fully funded maternity leave for its members. It was a breakthrough not just for workers at UBC, but for families across the country.

Maternity benefits for working women under the 1971 Unemployment Insurance Act provided eligible women with 15 weeks of paid benefits. Coverage at the time included 2/3 of a woman's normal pay, up to \$100/week. This legislation is largely credited to the Royal Commission Report on the Status of Women in 1970 that included maternity leave as one of its 167 recommendations.

The Association of University & College Employees (AUCE) was founded in British Columbia in 1973. Its roots were in the late 1960s socialist-feminist Vancouver Women's Caucus at Simon Fraser University and its offshoot the Working Women's Association (WWA). The WWA was critical of the existing trade union movement for what it perceived as its failure to address the issues of working women. It offered seminars to women on union organizing which were attended by

several women workers at UBC who went on to organize AUCE.

Other unions had already tried unsuccessfully to organize the UBC staff in the past. Multiple scattered worksites worked against the earlier organizing drives.

AUCE insisted it was a different kind of union: independent, democratic, transparent and consensus based. Its constitution included equal pay for equal work as the first objective of the Association.

A majority of AUCE's members were women, working in traditional clerical occupations. Local 1 organized the UBC campus into 12 divisions based on geography and department. This facilitated membership organizing and grassroots involvement in the union.

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A new provincial Labour Code passed by BC's first NDP government made union organizing easier for all workers. In 1974 AUCE Local 1 was certified by the Labour Relations Board as the bargaining agent for 1,200 library and clerical workers at UBC.

The 1960s and 70s were a time when employment in the public sector was expanding and women were joining unions in large numbers. The new female membership changed the face of the labour movement and greatly influenced the type of issues that were being brought to the bargaining table.

"There was lots of women's liberation talk in general in the public and that certainly affected us," remarked Jackie Ainsworth, one of the organizers of AUCE Local 1. "I really wanted to be involved in organizing an independent, feminist union."

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*-Jackie
Ainsworth*

After being certified to represent UBC clerical and library workers, AUCE Local 1 set about to negotiate its first collective agreement. Every bargaining proposal required approval of the general membership at a meeting.

At a special membership meeting on May 1, 1974 it was agreed that

fully funded maternity leave would be one of the bargaining demands:

No employee should lose her job or seniority in case of pregnancy. She should collect the benefits of the Maternities Provision of the Unemployment Act plus the difference of these benefits and her monthly salary from the University upon return to work.

When the first contract was agreed to in September 1974 it included the groundbreaking maternity leave provisions:

8. Maternity Leave

In case of pregnancy, a continuing and sessional employee shall not lose seniority entitlements. She shall receive the benefits of the Maternity Provision of the Unemployment Insurance Act.

Upon return to work, the employee shall be reinstated in her former position and the employer shall pay the difference of the benefits received and the employee's monthly salary.

The union had also taken a proposal for two weeks paid paternity leave to bargaining but was unsuccessful.

Over forty years after AUCE was formed the union organizers have reflected on how they achieved such an important victory with relative ease. Buoyed by the successful organizing drive, the cohesion of union members and extensive research, the Union came to the bargaining table much more prepared than management.

“We really ran that university into the ground in terms of bargaining,” reflected Emerald Murphy in 2018. “They were unprepared; they didn’t put anything on the table, so we ran with it.”

“They were totally off-guard; they were stunned,” commented Jackie Ainsworth.

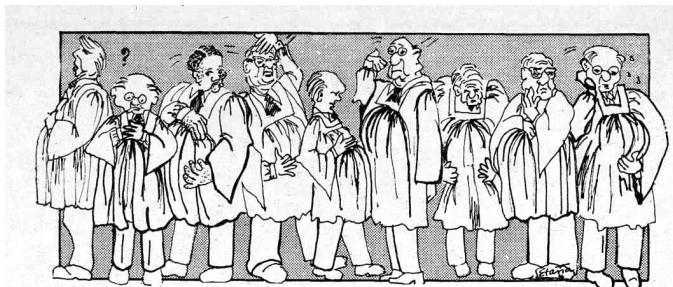
The first agreement also resulted in average wage increases of 54%, making UBC clerical workers the highest paid in the province.

In 1977, the Unemployment Insurance Commission, investigated AUCE maternity leave provisions. They viewed the “top up” women received under their contracts as an “overpayment” and began the process of forcing union members to repay the federal government all extra monies received. The federal courts disagreed and ruled in the union’s favour.



One month after winning fully funded maternity leave in their first collective agreement, AUCE participated in the Canadian Labour Congress' one-day General Strike against wage controls, October 14, 1976.

Support for better maternity leave and benefits grew across Canada. Other unions began to tackle the issue, but it was not until 1981 when the Canadian Union of Postal Workers fought for – and won – during a 45-day strike paid maternity benefits for its members. It was the first time that a national union had maternity benefits enshrined in their collective agreements. Other unions followed.



"Kinesis", April/May 1979

"Of course UIC doesn't discriminate against women —it only bars pregnant people from receiving benefits."

Maternity leave, paternity leave, adoption leave, and parental leave are now routinely negotiated by unions. Government has been forced to improve benefits offered through its unemployment insurance program to all workers.

In 1985 AUCE Local 1 joined the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and is now known as CUPE 2950.

Sources:

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The BC Labour Heritage Centre and the following groups contributed to this project:

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