

Saskatchewan Federation of Labour
Prairie School for Union Women
Labour History, Culture & Song

June 7-11, 2015

I was very fortunate to attend the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour's "Prairie School for Union Women" in Waskesiu located in northern Saskatchewan. I was registered in the Labour History, Culture & Song workshop and we had 12 participants and 2 great facilitators. I chose this workshop for personal knowledge.

The workshop was geared towards the history of labour and explained to us the proud history of the struggles that working men and women faced to give us many of the rights and freedoms we enjoy today. Many of us don't realize the benefits we have and too often take benefits like paid vacation leave, maternity benefits or health and safety regulations for granted. It taught us that without the strength and dedication of our sisters and brothers before us, we would not have such things.

We learnt about some of these historic events through music, creative arts and sharing of stories. We participated in many songs and some art projects as well. We looked at the labour movement's current struggles for social and economic justice and explored ways in which the creative arts can help to make labour awareness events such as picnics, May Day events, rallies and Union meetings more fun and interesting for people to attend. I am not a musical person, yet I found myself singing along and quite enjoying the music part of it. It was interesting to hear the history of the songs and the fact that many of them were written to the tunes of hymns when Unions were frowned upon. The meetings took place in churches so that if people were walking by they would assume it was a church service and the music was a hymn being sung rather than a Union song.

We had Barb Byers do a one hour presentation for the participants in our workshop. Barb is a huge labour activist in Saskatchewan and is the co-founder of the SFL Prairie School for Union Women. She was instrumental in getting an "Equality Statement" in place for Union functions because of the harassment that women faced while attending these functions. She told us stories of being elected on October 29, 1988 as the first women president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour and being arrested on December 9th when they "occupied" the Massey Ferguson Plant who had locked out the union members.

We heard of the strength, determination and hard work of the women in the Union and how they brought us some hard-won victories. And it's still hard to believe that it was only in 1929 that the Privy Council ruled "Women are persons". And it wasn't until 1960 that Aboriginal women got the right to vote. We've come a long way but still have a journey ahead of us.

It was an excellent workshop, lots of fun and very informative!

Respectfully submitted by,
Karen Carle