

# Ma Bell- what happens if your girls all hang up?

By AUDREY ADLER

Bell Canada is that sprawling pride of Canadian Nationalists corporation controlling some 20 odd subsidiaries and possessing assets of 3.6 billion dollars. It boasts to be 98 per cent Canadian owned with A.T. & T. owning only 2 per cent of its shares. It has a handy assortment of directors most of whom sit on the board of at least one large financing institution notably, the Bank of Montreal, the Bank of Commerce, and Sun Life Assurance Co. of Canada. Through its subsidiaries and the subsidiaries of its subsidiaries it controls a tremendous network of communications equipment and technological skill that no longer pertains directly to the telephone but has spread rampantly into all areas of electronic equipment. The strategic importance of such a company both to the Canadian economy and to the maintenance of communications is obvious. The Canadian government seems to be aware of this and casts a nervous glance at the operations of their chartered company. Bell is a private company and as Bell so quaintly put it in their public relations "history".

The telephone business is a natural monopoly, for the public is best served by a single integrated network. Regulation (through the Canadian Transport Commission), takes the place of normal competition.

Since the positive experience of the nationalization of the Manitoba system early in this century there has been some nervous agitation for a similar nationwide takeover of Bell's communications systems, and this has become a general grumbling since the recent toll price hikes. Otherwise, Bell, like other large corporations in Canada, has been gently treated by the government and with a 10.5 per cent increase in income in 1971 over 1970, Bell suffered a mere 1.4 per cent tax increase. Bell's general attitude towards nationalization seems to be "they can't touch us". As they put it:

## The Royal Commission Report on the Status of Women in Canada

### HIGHLIGHTS

In 1970, the female labour force numbered 2,690,000, an increase of 62.3 per cent since 1960.

Married women comprised 56.7 per cent of the female labour force in 1970, compared with 45.0 per cent in 1960.

In 1970, 32.0 per cent of all married women were in the labour force, compared with 19.2 per cent in 1960.

In 1970, 85.4 per cent of all single women aged 25 to 34 were in the labour force; 43.7 per cent of all married women aged 20 to 24 were also in the labour force.

In 1960, 1965 and 1970, the highest participation rate of women in the labour force occurred in Ontario, and the lowest rate occurred in the Atlantic provinces.

In 1970, one-quarter of all employed women worked part-time.

In 1970, women comprised 71 per cent of all persons employed in clerical occupations, and 60 per cent of all persons employed in service occupations.

In 1970, 1.55 per cent of women in the full-time employed labour force were absent from work because of illness for the whole of a given week, compared with 1.85 per cent of the men in the full-time employed labour force.

In 1968, 20.1 per cent of women paid workers were members of trade unions, compared with 39.7 per cent of men paid workers.

In 1970, 142,731 women were employed in establishments under federal jurisdiction, other than the Public Service of Canada; 52 per cent were employed in banking and 21 per cent in the telephone communication industry.

Bell Canada is in a sufficiently flexible position to accommodate its operations to federal and provincial legislation. No plans are contemplated to restructure the Company under provincial charters; such a move would create complex legal and financial problems and would be quite unnecessary in order to comply with any possible change in legislation.

As Canada's largest private corporation, Bell is also Canada's largest private employer of women. Bell employs approximately 38,000 people — 20,500 women and 17,500 men. The annual report proudly notes that the high level of business activity in 1971 was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number of employees. There was an increase of slightly more than 50 people. This is of course, an indication of good corporate practice and produces a maximization of profit. Bell also succeeded in minimizing of labour costs. The total payroll increase was less than one per cent for the same period of time.

## Canada's largest private outfit

There are two major employees associations at The Bell, one for the operators, the Traffic Employees Association and one for the clerical and other staff, the Canadian Telephone Employees' Association. Both are company unions and enjoy a cordial relationship with the company. The union history reads like a tribute to Bell's "voluntary" compliance with national labour legislation. There have been "raids" by larger unions, notably by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (AFLECIO), but none of these has managed to inspire a great deal of interest on the part of the employees and the women employees in particular. The main appeal of a regular union is the structural locals system, as opposed to the present set-up of district chairmen and representatives. The most important function of the present association seems to be in regular meetings in a grievance committee set-up with Bell Labour Relations people.

The Traffic Employees' Association is the association that has direct dealings with the largest number of women at The Bell. It is endearingly called TEA by its members. Some events from its shadier past are mentioned in order to give some idea of the tone and character of the association.

In 1944, the early beginnings of the association joined with the company in a submission to the Wartime Labour Relations Board to establish whether or not company payment of travel expenses for union members would be contrary to the intent of a regulation requiring independence of the unions from the company. This amicable partnership was nonetheless turned down by the Wartime Labour Relations Board who considered it unfair labour practices. Out of the struggle came a recognition of unity of ends between the association and the company — so much for the membership.

At a recent general council meeting of TEA, the president, Mary Lennox, gave a rousing speech in which she touched on the serious and upsetting activity on the part of "some labour unions in Quebec". She commended Bell employees for staying on the switchboard and conducting themselves as "mature people". She added that the association had been concerned for the safety of its membership in Quebec. Although she seemed unaware of the contradictions involved, she added that she was sympathetic towards the objectives and endeavours of the people of Quebec and that she had been watching "the development of the conflict of interest between the unions and some political ideologies". Her brilliant solution was that Canadians must obey the law. Lennox said that as leader she could lead the "militant" she said, "assume responsibilities which are not mine in the political field. This union will always do what is best for this union and what is best for the majority of the people we represent for that is the democratic way. We must stand for what is right, we must defend those things in which we believe and we must do it as individuals."

In fact, the association is so justice oriented that it endorses all sorts of wage and hour disparities even among employees working in the same job classification. The most pathetic example of this is to be found in the toll operator shifts.

Those sexy voices that answer calls between seven a.m. and six p.m. work a seven hour day and are paid for a six and a half-hour day at the basic starting rate of \$87.50 per week. The evening shifts whose different "tours" range from 4:40 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. work six and a half-hour shifts, get paid for their lunch breaks — that is, they're in the office a total of six and one half hours as opposed to the day staff's 7 hours, and are paid the basic starting salary of \$87.50 per week plus differentials for working late hours, and a free taxi ride home if their tour ends after midnight. The

all-night staff works a boring eight hour shift, their lunch break is not paid for and they receive the basic salary of \$87.50 per week, plus differentials for night hours that amount to less than the taxi fare home which they don't get even on Sunday mornings when the subway doesn't open until 9 o'clock. Their shift ends at seven in the morning. So much for the ideals of TEA.

The general attitude of the employees sees the union as a useless organization and a bit of a joke. Last summer a great deal of anger was aroused at the time of the wildcat strike because there were no strike funds. No one bothered to explain the meaning of a company union either before or after the strike.

In the nether-world existence of the operators at The Bell the union and the company are more or less synonymous and form that sector of their lives in which they don't really exist. The job is mechanical and boring. The supervision is needlessly strict and the pressure applied by the divide-and-conquer hierarchy of supervisors, assistant chief operators and chief operators, each of whom is responsible for the work of the people just below them is excessive. The time it takes to answer each incoming call on the switchboard is automatically recorded and a count is made of the slow calls on the half-hour. This count becomes a mystical entity called the "answer" that plays a major role in the daily lives of operators. One operator phoned in to say she would be late because she had to take her child to the hospital. When she arrived some hours late she was mildly reprimanded because the answer would be slow. This in itself is not amaking, but afterwards the operator found quietly crying on her break, she wasn't worried about her sick child, but about the answer and how she had let the office down. Not only does the union identify its interests with the interests of the company, but the employees often catch themselves in the act.

The family, the boyfriend, the fiancée are the real world and work is something that they do because they have to. The atmosphere on breaks and lunches is one of catty dislike among the women. They seem fully aware of the total distortion of the others but somehow find personal refuge in their own private lives. The younger women talk about boyfriends, the older and wiser concentrate on children. The disappointments of married life seem to cause a redirection of affection onto children with the dim awareness that is just a substitute for something else — what it is seems uncertain.

The effects of this kind of numbness in working women for union activity is obvious. They just want to go home and never see the place again. They don't regard their jobs as careers and most are interested mainly in keeping their whole activity at work as far from their consciousness as possible. The reasons for this attitude have been documented over and over again in reports on women in the labour force and the general conclusion is that it is the result of the general acceptance of social values in which women's role is clearly defined as inferior and passive with a major concern for the family. Working women have little opportunity to question these values and their positions at work tend to re-inforce those values.

In Canada 60 per cent of all persons employed in service industries are women. This is second only to clerical occupation in which women fill 71 per cent of the jobs. Bell itself, is the largest Canadian employer of women and TEA claims approximately 90 per cent of Bell's eligible employees as members. The national average of women membership in unions related to the service industries is 40.7 per cent. This is high compared with other industries but Bell far surpasses any industry average.

The number of women entering the working force in 1971 was 62.3 per cent higher than the number entering the labour force in 1970. This represents an



increase of 1,033,000 women. It is little wonder that the Royal Commission on the Status of Women noted that many men had the attitude that women were taking away their jobs. At the same time, men tended to regard the work women did as inferior and subsidiary to their own work. Within the present structure of the family it is quite true that women's income is subsidiary to that of the man of the house (also she is paid less). There is even a certain recognition of higher economic status in a family that can afford to keep women at home. Consequently, men both fear and belittle women in the labour force.

Distribution of paid female workers and female union members in selected industries, and percentage of female workers in those industries who were union members, Canada, 1967.

Industry	Female Union Members		
	Paid Female Workers (000's)	Number (000's)	Per Cent of Total Female Workers
Manufacturing	394	125	31.7
Trade	407	33	8.1
Services	1,048	138	13.2
Transportation and Public Utilities	88	36	40.7
Public Administration	106	65	61.3

SOURCE: Compiled from the Annual Report of the Minister of Trade and Commerce under the Corporations and Labour Unions Returns Act (1967), Part II, Ottawa, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1969, Table 28A; DBS, 12-month Annual Averages, 1967, Special Table 3C.

—Royal Commission Report on the Status of Women in Canada

One of the most logical procedures for men who fear that women will take over men's jobs is to lend their voices to working women's struggle for equal wages. Women are only a direct threat in this way when they can be used as cheap labour.

The royal commission also noted that men tended to regard women who were active in the labour movement as somehow masculine. Their attitude in general was that women were timid and did not know enough about unions to be able to make any valuable contributions. The commission found that positive feelings towards women workers, their struggles and their roles in unions increased in direct proportion to the amount of experience and responsibility the men had in the labour movement. Presumably a similar awareness of themselves would occur if women had a greater role in the labour activities at their work places.

But it is clear that the struggle of women within the labour movement has great potential as a divisive force between the two sexes in the working classes. Up until the present the potential for this division has been absorbed by women who have preferred to regard their own work as comparatively unimportant in contrast to men's work and to agree that doing women's work means doing less work. If this trend continues it further consolidates the useful oppression of women both in the home and on the labour market. Women will remain cornered in their home lives even though they are at work — much as the women at Bell regard what they do at work as a half-life. They will remain a cheap reserve labour market for usage in times of economic need. The alternative is quickly closing — that is, women remaining in the home all together. In a small pamphlet entitled *Incomes, Disparity, and Impoverishment in Canada Since World War II*, Leo Johnson analyses a great deal of statistical material and concludes that there is an underlying problem of accelerating im-

pooverishment of low-income workers and a resulting disparity between the rich and the poor.

Johnson's examination reveals that while per capita incomes and per income earners incomes have increased tremendously in the period between 1948 and 1968, and while dollar incomes rose rapidly, in most income levels rising costs of living created a drastic decline in purchasing power, especially among the lower income groups. The bottom 10 per cent of income earners in the 1948-1968 period suffered a loss of 35.6 per cent in purchasing power. By comparison, the top 10 per cent of income earners gained 51.4 per cent in purchasing power. Johnson points out that the trend in decreasing purchasing power is moving gradually to the higher level low-income earners. The trend in a long-term view is that the top percentage of income earners are earning a larger percentage of the national income. As Johnson points out, when the government claims that it is the exorbitant demands and increases in wages won by Canadian workers that has created inflation they are dead wrong, since the only people who have received largely increased percentages of the national income have been the richest one-third of Canadian income earners.

The most important point made by Johnson in terms of women in the working force shows that increased participation in the labour market, particularly the introduction of the married woman, has created the multi-earner family. The growth of multi-earner families has meant that while the proportions of income received by the bottom 10 per cent of all individual wage-earners has declined sharply from 1951 to 1965, incomes of families have either held their own or increased slightly. Johnson says: "Among families, it is clear, the stigma of welfare is evaded through additional members entering the work force."

Juliet Mitchell observes in *Womens Esatate*, that

although socialism does not automatically bring about the liberation of women, women's emancipation is not contrary to the social organization of socialism as it is to that of capitalism. That doesn't mean the women at Bell must turn into militant socialists, it simply recognizes that the source of the problem of women's liberation is equally the source of all the problems of the present economic and social organization. To suggest what feminists like Shulamith Firestone suggest — that the women's struggle can be fought separately — is to postulate in a vacuum.

It's clear that the movement cannot effectively remain an intellectual movement. There are 20,000 employees at Bell that are passively waiting for the next shift so that they can go home and cook dinner. The next shift in the women's movement should be towards the working women of Bell and other companies.

## Just waiting for the next shift

The general pessimism with regard to the waking up of working women is not entirely founded. There have been some inspiring struggles that have brought the most insulated women into active roles and that have caused all sorts of practical changes in their lives. One example is the Texpack strike in Brantford last year. Mostly immigrant women with little English, working for poor wages were slowly brought together and organized by a small group of inexperienced women organizers. The struggles that arose out of repeated attempts at certification and the strike that followed brought to the fore an unexpected militancy, a strong community commitment and a reorganization of family life. Work at the old textile factory will never be the same for those women and undoubtedly, the home is experiencing a change of character.

To summarize these somewhat random and dispersed ideas, Bell Telephone represents a model of the modern capitalist corporation. Its attitude towards the government is somewhat haughty and with good reason since it reserves tremendous control of the economy. But despite all this Bell is mercilessly dependent on its employees who possess the knowledge and technical skill to control or destroy the company. Through the impotence of a union that serves the company and through the oppressive force of the family and the supposed role of the women in the family, the employees have been integrated in the system and quietly more than serve the needs of the company. A general lack of knowledge about their economic situation greatly contributes to the myth of general contentment in this situation. The increase of women in the working force, the result of necessity brought about by the increasing polarization of incomes in Canadian wage earners, is seen as a threat to the male's job. The problems produced by the economic system become internal squabbles and the very situation that promised to emancipate women drives them farther into subjection. Meanwhile on the university campus women's libbers are debating whether or not Marx is just part of male culture. The necessity is to shift to a real analysis of the primary sources of women's oppression and as Mitchell says, women have to fight their battle at the weakest point of opposition with their strongest weapon. To discover the weakest link requires a great deal of rigorous social and economic analysis.

The strongest weapon will be women who have become aware of their unenviable positions and with desire to change their lots. Working women will not arrive at these conclusions alone for they have displayed a willingness to assume the roles assigned to them by an oppressive social order. This order must be exposed and understood and related to the everyday experience of women. Women will be educated through their own struggles if they begin to struggle, and an understanding of larger social goals will supercede the present clinging to the oppressive family roles. The emphasis on the family as the individual social unit has deflected attention and energy from the recognition and large scale protest of real social injustice and economic irrationality. Seen in this light, the women's movement, which aims at the exposure and the smashing of the oppressive elements of the family is vitally important to rising social awareness of more than half the Canadian population, and in a less direct way, the whole population.

Neither the women's movement nor a women's labour movement automatically engenders such an awareness, as history has shown. An intellectual and practical liaison between the two must be established, and this would necessarily involve an investigation of the real and practical nature of the problem.