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Pioneering Women's Committee Struggles with Hard Times

■ *Alex Brown & Laurie Sheridan*

The Women's Committee of IUE Local 201, established informally in 1976 and officially in 1978, is one of the oldest and longest-lived union women's committees in the country. It took root and thrived within a large and overwhelmingly male General Electric manufacturing complex in the Greater Boston area and within one of the oldest, most democratic and most progressive union locals in the labor movement.

For the past 11 years, the Committee has battled an extremely insensitive and recalcitrant GE management over a wide range of issues—winning substantial victories for training and entry of women into skilled jobs, for comparable worth wage adjustments in traditional jobs, and for pregnancy disability benefits and parental leave. Committee members have counseled hundreds of women and spearheaded fights for individual grievances on pregnancy disability, sexual harassment and discrimination.

Within the local, the Committee's activities have created a more

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- This article is a collaboration by four past and present chairs of the Women's Committee of IUE Local 201. Alex Brown, the current Committee chair and a skilled worker at the GE plant in Lynn, and Laurie Sheridan, now an organizer for Parents United for Child Care in Boston, wrote the article with help from Marcia Hams and Susan LeBlanc.

positive climate for women to become stewards and committee members and to run for offices on the Policy Board. Most of the Committee leaders and many of the active members are a key part of the progressive wing within Local 201.

But the local now faces massive layoffs triggered by GE's transfer of work to other plants in the U.S. and abroad. The cuts began in June 1987 and are expected to reach 3,000 or 4,000 members by the middle of 1989. With its ranks being cut in half, Local 201 membership is understandably uneasy about its future, and many of the Women's Committee's past accomplishments are now in jeopardy.

As preparations begin for the national GE contract, which expires in June, GE is pushing for major concessions as the price to pay for job security. The progressive movement is faced with the dual tasks of opposing concessions and pushing to save jobs. In this context, the Women's Committee's challenge is to push ahead with its agenda in a very difficult political climate. As 1988 begins, both Local 201 and its Women's Committee are in rapid transition.

Forming the Women's Committee

Often referred to in the history books as "GE Lynn," the General Electric complex where IUE 201 now represents about 6,600 workers is actually spread out over four towns on the north shore of Boston. Basically a defense plant with some commercial contracts, the complex manufactures aircraft instruments, airplane engines, and steam turbines for power generation.

There are three bargaining units within Local 201. The Everett/Riverworks unit represents the vast majority, 5,400, of the local's membership and is more than 90% male. Because GE has segregated jobs by sex, women are concentrated in the Salary (300 workers) and Wilmington (850) bargaining units. About 45% of the workers at the Wilmington plant are women, and they are concentrated in the lower-rated jobs. Women comprise about 17% of the total union workforce.

Before a 1978 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) consent decree required GE to provide entry to and training for skilled operative and apprentice jobs, only a handful of women were hired into the blue-collar jobs. Rates for secretaries, payroll clerks, accounting clerks and keypunch operators are still below those of a sweeper in the factory. Job segregation between plants is maintained by a policy which does not allow transfers between bargaining units, either for promotion or during

most layoffs. Transfers to an equal or lower-rated job in order to get into a new job family are almost impossible.

Despite this familiar pattern of job segregation and lower wages, GE is still a highly attractive employer for women in the Boston area. As a unionized plant, its wages are well above the average for clerical, electrical assembly and other semi-skilled jobs available to women.

The Women's Committee was started in 1976 as an ad hoc effort by some of the pioneers who first entered the non-traditional blue-collar jobs at the main Riverworks plant. At that time more women than ever before were being hired into shop areas of the plant. They were facing problems of discrimination in training, in treatment by foremen, in initial hiring rates, and in upgrade possibilities. As it began to address these problems, the Committee developed a more permanent status in the union. In 1978, over the opposition of much of the local's leadership but with the support of a core of progressive men and women, an amendment to the constitution was ratified by a vote of the membership making the Committee a permanent standing committee of the local, with 15 members elected by the membership at large.

Local 201 has traditionally been a militant local, going all the way back to the period between the 1930s and the 1950s when it was Local 201 of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE). (The full name of the IUE is the International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Salaried, Machine and Furniture Workers.) Its militant history gave the local a very democratic union structure, allowing for direct membership election of union committees. When activated, the committee structure encourages broad participation by the rank and file in the life of the union, and this is what the Women's Committee built upon.

Another factor essential to the formation and character of the 201 Women's Committee was the new wave of younger women who entered the plants in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of affirmative action hiring requirements. Many of these women were progressives inspired by the civil rights, anti-war and student movements of the 1960s, and they rapidly became involved in shopfloor and union politics. Many of the best men stewards were also progressives, and they supported organizing around women's and minority workers' issues. Likewise, the women's movement was an essential influence from the very beginning, as it challenged what was considered appropriate work for women and inspired many to become pioneers in non-traditional occupations.

As these women joined older women in the plant—some of whom had worked there since World War II and many of whom

had participated in long-standing union grievances against sex discrimination, as well as in broader union issues in the local—they formed a powerful combination to create an organized presence and voice for women in the local.

Comparable Worth & the Krikorian Suit

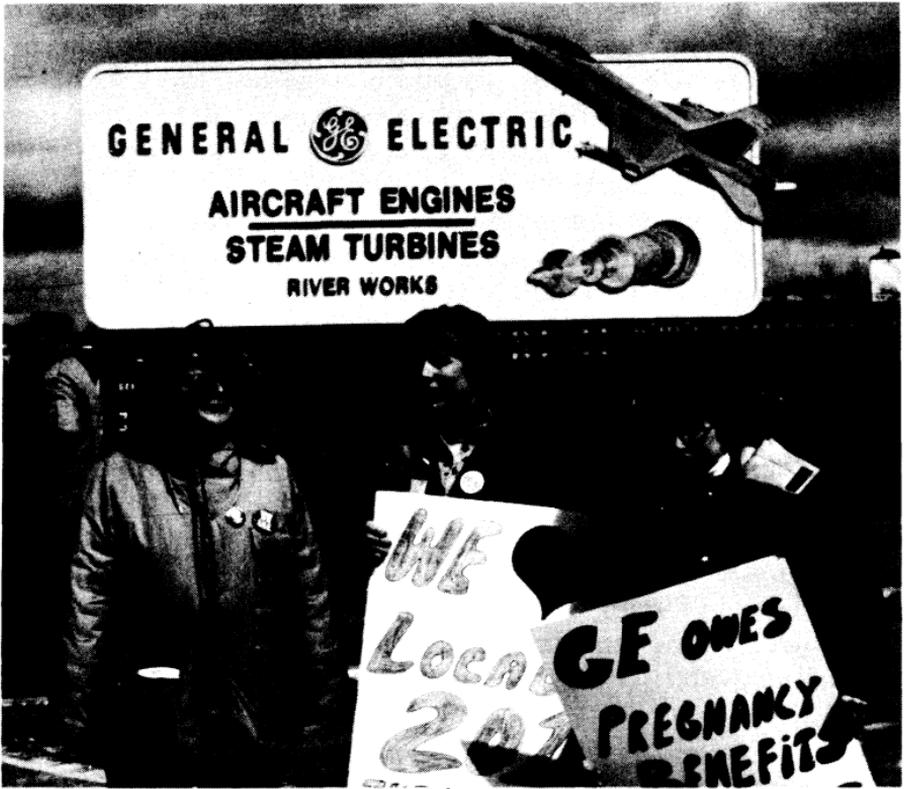
The most significant development for women at GE was the comparable worth settlement known as "the Krikorian suit," sparked by the inadequacies of the 1978 EEOC-GE consent decree.

Agreed upon by GE and the EEOC without any input from women, minorities or union representatives, the 1978 consent decree nowhere addressed the sex segregation which blocked access for the majority of women to the higher paid jobs in Riverworks/Everett. Nor did it compensate women for years of undervalued jobs at much lower rates. Angered by its failure to upgrade their jobs, 200 women condemned the decree at a union meeting called to explain its terms, and Local 201 leaders vowed to sue on behalf of these women.

The Krikorian suit included more than 130 wage-rate grievances from the Wilmington plant and similar grievances from Riverworks/Everett protesting rates too low for the level of skill required. As the case progressed, it also came to include other grievances from the Riverworks/Everett plants covering upgrading, pregnancy disability, child care leave and initial assignment rates.

From the filing of the suit in 1978 to its final settlement in 1982, a number of events brought pressure on GE. One was a strike in 1979 by 29 employees, mostly women, over a wage rate; though the strike was largely unsuccessful, it attracted solid support from Riverworks workers and focused attention on the comparable wage issue. Wilmington salary employees voted to strike over an upgrade grievance of a woman, and men and women in a blue-collar department at Wilmington stuck together to win a strike. GE understood that it would have to deal with unrest in its plants if Krikorian was not settled.

Additional pressure on GE to settle came from the introduction of independent counsel, after GE had challenged the IUE's ability to represent women plaintiffs because its leadership was predominantly male. Nancy Gertner, an attorney skilled in representing discrimination cases, became the plaintiffs' counsel, and she met frequently with the plaintiffs and the Women's Committee as the suit progressed. Gertner made it clear to GE that she would pursue the case with or without the union if GE did not agree to a comprehensive settlement.



Susan Fialkin

After four years of struggle, the final settlement posted major gains for women in the plants. The wage rates of 353 people in predominantly female job classifications were raised an average of two-and-a-half rates, and the two lowest rates were eliminated. Individual plaintiffs and retirees got back pay totalling \$115,000. Job posting procedures and training programs were greatly strengthened, as were temporary assignment guidelines and local layoff and transfer agreements. And the settlement included maternity benefits and child care leaves-of-absence for all the plants.

With the winning of the Krikorian agreement, a key focus of the Women's Committee shifted to the implementation of the plan, as GE consistently fought to take back in practice what it had granted in theory.

The training programs were poorly implemented. Continual problems with notification, planning and curriculum discouraged trainees, causing large numbers to drop out; poor management had particularly severe effects on minority women. Other provisions of the settlement were enforced sporadically, if at all. Some of the job posting requirements, for example, proved difficult to

enforce except where case-by-case pressure was brought by the Women's Committee and active stewards. Similarly, a requirement that new female hires be placed on wage-rate levels similar to those of new male hires was never implemented; the local never requested the data necessary to enforce it, and, of course, the company never supplied it.

Despite the fact that many of the new provisions would have benefited many union members (male and female), there was little interest in their enforcement at higher levels of the union, where they were seen as "women's issues." Perhaps more important, some of the new provisions threatened the power of an older patronage system that persisted, with company encouragement, among a number of union officials who derived individual power from controlling who gets hired and promoted, despite the seniority and job posting system.

With help from other union officials and stewards, however, the Women's Committee persisted against all these obstacles and succeeded in forcing GE to comply with the bulk of the Krikorian advances. At the same time, the Committee was moving on other fronts as well.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment has been a chronic and critical problem for women in GE plants, especially after the entrance of large numbers of women into previously all-male occupations. There have been numerous situations of women being harassed over a long period of time, to the point of requiring psychiatric or medical treatment or of quitting their jobs.

Several dramatic incidents of sexual assault posed real crises for the union and the Women's Committee, but they also caused a leap in consciousness and sensitivity to these problems. In 1979 a black woman on third shift was raped by an employee within the plant. Union women, with support from local community leaders, organized community meetings and media publicity to agitate for safer working conditions for women in the plant, particularly on the two night shifts. While the company's response was far from effective and while there was confusion about what the union's involvement should be, the incident served to heighten awareness of the difficulties women were experiencing at GE.

In 1981, following an incident in which a young secretary was molested and threatened by her managers, the union was more on top of things. Some 300 male production workers in an adjacent work area immediately walked off the job, refusing to work until

the managers were removed. This time the Women's Committee mobilized the membership more effectively, and the local organized busloads of members to demonstrate at a top manager's home. Eventually the mounting publicity and unrest in the plant forced the company to remove both managers.

A major result of this mobilization was an enormous amount of discussion and education in the plant. The Committee arranged for outside speakers to address the membership and officers, and prepared a sheet of guidelines for stewards on how to deal with cases of sexual harassment. In addition to organizing a series of stewards' classes on the subject, the Committee developed a program that trained 25 "sexual harassment advocates," women and a few men from each area and shift in the plant to be available to help, support and counsel any victim of sexual harassment, to take appropriate action and to assist in preparing a grievance if necessary. This program was publicized through the union newspaper and in flyers posted in ladies' rooms and circulated throughout the plant. The program not only was helpful to victims, it probably prevented some new instances because it provided a new level of awareness of the problem.

This program received little support from the union leadership, however, and that's the main reason it dwindled over time. In cases where a woman was being harassed by a fellow union member, the union's response depended on the strength of a particular union official on the issue. In some cases, pressure put on the harasser by a steward or Board member was effective. In other cases, if the union was not able or willing to resolve the situation, a woman's only alternatives were to seek outside recourse through the company, the police and courts or to endure the harassment, quit or transfer.

In cases where the perpetrator of the sexual harassment was a member of management, the union was usually more effective. Several grievances have been successfully brought against managers and foremen, but even these cases require constant vigilance and pressure.

In few of these situations has the company seen fit to take appropriate disciplinary or remedial action, and in fact often has threatened to discipline the woman employee who has complained. In the worst instances, the company has responded to minor incidents by harshly disciplining a male union member, while rarely taking any action against managers guilty of much more serious sexual harassment. This has caused serious divisions within the union and has made effective and appropriate responses to sexual harassment all the more difficult.

Issues of Home Life

While still monitoring the Krikorian settlement, the Women's Committee began around 1983 to turn its focus toward issues raised by the problems women had working at GE while pregnant and raising children. One of the principal reasons for this shift was the growing perception that it is not enough to open up training opportunities and access to non-traditional jobs for women; it is also necessary to provide the conditions for their survival on those jobs.

As more and more of the new generation of women at GE, including many union activists and Women's Committee members, were becoming pregnant and raising children, the need for adequate maternity leave and child care were being raised more and more often to and by the Women's Committee. Women soon learned, however, that they faced an extremely hostile company and also, sometimes, an unsupportive union.

Pregnancy Disability Benefits

GE's attitude toward its pregnant workers is best shown by the fact that in the late 1970s, it fought all the way to the Supreme Court for the right to exclude pregnancy disability from coverage under disability insurance plans.

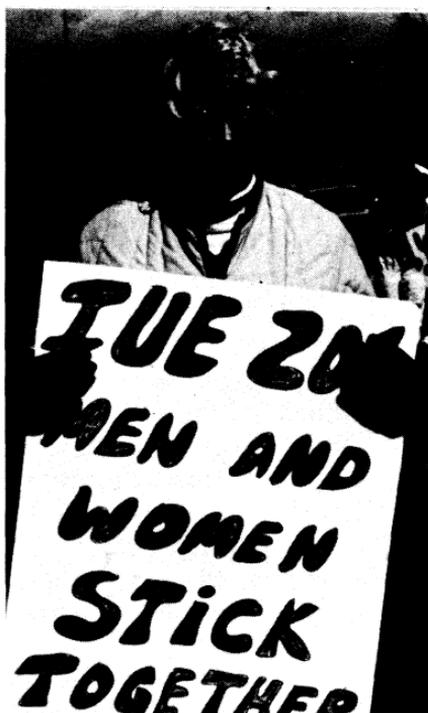
In 1978 Congress passed the federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act, making it illegal for a company to treat pregnancy different from other disabilities for purposes of pay, seniority and job security. Given GE's union-negotiated Sickness and Accident policy at the time, this extended valuable benefits to pregnant workers. But GE management did its best to keep those benefits a secret, including by misrepresenting the policy to its employees. In 1981 the Women's Committee wrote and distributed a pamphlet on pregnancy disability, explaining what women's rights were and how to get help from the union or the Committee.

In 1982, as part of the Krikorian settlement, pregnant women's rights were expanded. Under the agreement, disability was based not only on a woman's "inability to perform the duties of her job," as previously; benefits could now also begin when an "employee's physician found that the employee's work presents potential harm to the employee or the unborn child." This language was especially important for women who worked with dangerous chemicals that could harm the developing fetus but not necessarily the mother.

For awhile, between 1982 and 1984, GE paid many of the disability claims pregnant women brought under this new provision. But from the summer of 1984 to the summer of 1986,

another 25 claims had piled up, and most of them had been grieved unsuccessfully. In the fall of 1986, the Women's Committee approached the attorney who had handled the Krikorian case about a new suit, one that would draw on an insurance fraud law that forced a guilty party to pay triple damages.

Using the threat of this triple-damages law suit, the Committee was able to force GE to pay the disability money owed on past claims. It was unable, however, to get the pregnancy disability policy won in the Krikorian suit extended past 1987, when it expired. As a result, it is not entirely clear what policy GE is now operating under, but the Committee plans to grieve and litigate any and all denials of pregnancy claims.



Susan Flaiklin

Parental Leave

GE had a history of discriminating against working mothers by denying them leave to take care of their newborn children. The Krikorian settlement provided for parental leave for parents "on a consistent basis and without regard to sex." Now new or adoptive parents could take up to 12 months of unpaid leave and return to their old jobs afterwards, just as GE employees had been able to do for years for travel, education, military duty or government service. Over the years GE had in fact offered leaves of absence for almost any reason *except* caring for a new baby.

Many new mothers have taken advantage of the parental leave policy, at least for as many months of unpaid leave as they could afford. But the five-year Krikorian agreement has now run out, and GE has notified union members that it is replacing it with a new policy that essentially eliminates parental leaves. In a giant step backward, GE is now limiting the right to parental leave to mothers of children with "a medical condition that requires their presence at home." Without parental leave, many new mothers

may have to quit their jobs after childbirth, or else return to work too soon.

Child Care

Mothers at GE have also faced difficulties with the company after returning to work, and many have quit work because of hardships associated with combining working there and raising children. The key issues have been the lack of quality day care slots in the area and the high cost of child care.

For over five years, the Women's Committee has been trying to convince GE to help employees with the cost and availability of child care. In 1983 the Committee distributed a survey on child care needs to the 201 membership and received 420 responses, the highest response rate to any survey the local had ever undertaken. When asked the question, "Would you use a Child Care Center if it were located at or near your plant?" 314 responded "Yes." Surprisingly, the majority of the respondents were men! This helped demonstrate that child care is not just a woman's issue—it is a family issue and one that affects a large number of union members.

Aided by a local graduate student, the Committee then prepared a report on the availability of day care in the north shore area; it showed that day care was critically scarce, priced out of reach of GE employees, and unavailable for many of the hours that factory workers worked. Spurred on by this research, the Committee put together a 20-page proposal for a "Day Care Center and Satellite Family Day Care System for Employees of GE." It used the results of the earlier research as well as detailing the positive experience of companies who provide employer-supported day care. This proposal won the support of the local's Executive Board, but the company has only met with the union once in an informal meeting.

Finally, although a presentation by two Women's Committee members was warmly received by the IUE-GE Conference Board (the national IUE body that coordinates contract negotiations), once the layoffs were announced child care was placed on the back burner.

On all the issues facing mothers—pregnancy disability, parental leave and child care—the Women's Committee has been able to defend women's legal and contractual rights which are not defended in most non-union workplaces. Years of organizing, proposals, questionnaires and presentations have raised the consciousness of the union leadership and membership on the importance of bargaining with GE about home life issues. But it

has yet to win the gains that working families need.

GE's Ultimate Weapon—Layoffs

Conditions for women at GE are now worsening. Many of the women who were able to enter skilled training programs and skilled jobs over the last ten years of affirmative action gains are losing these jobs in the face of major layoffs. We are seeing the effects of "last hired, first fired" at first hand. In a year or two, if present trends continue, most of the women in skilled occupations in the plant will have lost them, either because they will be laid off or because they will have to bump downward into lower-paid semi-skilled or unskilled jobs.

Tough times for unions in general and for Local 201 in particular have made GE more bold and more unwilling to move on any issue. GE is not alone among multinational corporations in shutting down their manufacturing plants and moving them abroad or in subcontracting the work out to non-union workplaces.

Nor is Local 201 alone among the GE work force in facing layoffs and concession bargaining. It is in fact the last in the unionized GE chain to feel the brunt of a corporate strategy that has cut more than 125,000 jobs since 1981. The news of big layoffs and the halting of a late and controversial "Campaign to Save Our Jobs" in the local have left most members demoralized about the future and their union's ability to affect it. The union is on the defensive just to ensure that the layoffs are done properly in accordance with seniority. It's not hard to see why some members have decided to look out only for themselves. In this situation, it's harder to mobilize for a fight, especially one that appears to affect only women.

In a period of layoffs, GE looks for any reason to get rid of people they don't want. Since the layoff announcements, for example, they have been much stricter about discipline cases. In this context, GE is much less likely to extend pregnancy benefits or help with child care arrangements that will make it easier for women to stay at GE. A poor pregnancy disability policy, for example, makes it more likely that a woman will quit the company rather than stay and endanger the health of her baby.

Companies like GE are, of course, reinforced by the general political climate after seven years of Reagan. The early sex and race bias suits were won with the help of government in the context of the civil rights and women's movements pushing for equality in the workplace. Seven years of neglect and hostility toward equal opportunity have taken their toll.

Women & the Progressive Coalition

While the Women's Committee can control neither the layoffs nor the persistent viciousness of GE's disregard for all its workers, some of its present weakness derives from 1985 and 1986 when the Committee failed to organize rank-and-file pressure on the progressive leadership that briefly held power in the local.

Until 1985 the top union leadership (in 201 this is chiefly the Business Agent) was relatively hostile to the Committee. But they participated in the Krikorian negotiations and settlement because they understood that if the union did not represent its female membership satisfactorily, the local itself could be subject to a discrimination suit by its women members. This potential threat, backed up by hard work and organizing as well as support from progressive male stewards and Executive Board members, gave the Committee room to move in the local. The Committee organized many activities without the monetary support of the local, and many members of the Committee put in a lot of volunteer time in addition to the regular but limited "lost time" meetings (union-paid time during work hours).

Either through their experience with discrimination in the plant or through seeing that the local did not take leadership on issues affecting women, many women became part of a loose opposition coalition within the local. This progressive coalition had been building during the mid-1970s and by 1983 had elected several Executive Board members. In 1985, it joined with more moderate forces who wanted to "fight the company" and ran an informal slate for BA and other offices on issues such as democracy in the union newspaper, opposition to concessions, and organizing the membership to fight the company through the stewards' council and elected committees. The coalition won the election, took a majority on the Executive Board, and Ron Malloy became the BA.

Many women activists and members of the Women's Committee worked hard to support Malloy and the whole coalition. A woman ran his campaign and others handed out literature, wore buttons and talked him up in the plant. Expectations were high on the Committee that finally the BA would provide leadership and take on GE around issues affecting women.

But the moderates within the progressive coalition and Malloy, as the chief negotiator for the union, did not put a very high priority on the further enforcement of Krikorian, progress on child care or combatting sexual harassment by management or union members. Only after a year and a half of internal pressure and finally threats was the Women's Committee able to get the top



Ted Cormick

union officers to commit to a strategy to enforce Krikorian.

Women's Committee members were reluctant to criticize Malloy publicly when they disagreed with his stand on these issues. Since his first days in office, the right wing in the local had viciously attacked Malloy in plant-gate fliers. Not wanting to add any ammunition for the company or the union right wing, whose record on women's issues was worse than Malloy's, the Committee relied on internal pressure. Instead, the Committee needed at this point to focus its activities on organizing in the shop, highlighting GE's policies, and give up on leadership from the top officers unless pressured from groups of workers, men and women, organized around the issues.

While the Malloy years were frustrating ones for making progress on child care and pregnancy disability, it was a time when some women became more active in the union as stewards. During the local's "Strike for Respect" in 1986, women were active picket captains, ran the press outreach, made up the benefit checks, and set up a day care room to make it possible for parents to picket.

Also during this time, the Women's Committee requested and the Executive Board approved two hours per week of union-paid time for a member of the Committee to be present at the union hall to receive calls from members on specific problems. Women's Committee members volunteered additional time to make up a total of four hours of coverage each Tuesday afternoon. This Women's Committee "hotline" gets lots of calls from women in the shop; and stewards and Board members refer problems on pregnancy disability, child care leave, and sexual harassment. In addition to making the Committee more accessible to women, this time has also enabled the Committee to have a more active presence among stewards and Board members, and has provided time to reach key leadership when business needs to be done.

Unfortunately, however, too often women's issues then became viewed as only a problem for the Women's Committee and not for the union as a whole. At least for a brief period during and after the Krikorian settlement, the opposite had been the case.

Union elections raised a question about the future of the Women's Committee. Right in the middle of the pregnancy disability campaign that began in late 1986 and ended with the final settlement in late 1987, there was a six-month period of two bitterly contested union elections that claimed the attention of Committee organizers as well as the whole union. The first election, held in March 1987, was for the whole array of union leadership from BA and president down to steward. It was an ideological contest, pitting the progressive incumbent against a conservative. The conservatives blamed the layoffs on Malloy's militance and opposed the Campaign to Save Jobs that had targeted GE's corporate strategy of moving work away from unionized plants. The conservatives won because the Malloy administration was unable to put together a winning strategy against GE. The defeat of Malloy and the progressives, which ended the fledgling fight to save jobs and endangered the fight against concessions, demoralized many activists.

Because several members of the Women's Committee, including the leadership, were very active in the progressives' campaign and because one of the conservatives' campaign issues was to cut back funds for committees to meet on lost time, the Committee was concerned for the future of its current projects when the new leadership took over.

The second election, in June, for the ten standing committees including the Women's Committee, was especially hotly contested in the Riverworks plant, where the majority of members work. The Women's Committee was targeted by the conservatives as a key location to replace progressive committee leadership. Some experienced organizers were defeated, but the previous leadership was re-elected to co-chair the Committee.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Despite the overwhelming defeat of most of the progressive leadership in the local last year and the lack of support from present leadership, the Women's Committee is surviving and even continuing to forge ahead on several fronts. The combined loss of jobs and morale that now pervades Local 201, however, means that it becomes more and more difficult to organize and make gains. As the struggle to save union jobs becomes an urgent priority,

"women's issues" get less and less attention from the local and its members.

One result of the loss of jobs and morale has been a now continuous loss of leadership and membership of Women's Committee stalwarts, as members continue to leave the local both voluntarily and involuntarily. One challenge for the Committee is to rebuild an active core of members able to carry out future campaigns. This is all the harder as all GE workers are finding their job assignments constantly changed by the layoffs and bumps. Women, concentrated in the lower-level jobs, are affected more often by the bumping than the men, who are more heavily represented in the higher rates. Bumping into a new job means a cut in pay and for women, the necessity of "breaking in" a new crew of men and winning acceptance as a woman in a new area. The frequent bumping also wreaks havoc on the stability of workers' shifts and therefore their child care arrangements, making it harder for women to participate in union activities.

Given the effects of the layoffs, the Women's Committee needs to be more focused in what it takes up. In spite of its limits, the recent pregnancy disability settlement was a victory, something which is rare right now in Local 201. The Committee also has recently been written into a state grant targetting reproductive hazards in the workplace. And the Committee is planning a campaign to push gains on child care benefits and dependent care leave in the upcoming contract. Always one of the most active of the standing committees, the Women's Committee still is, even in troubled times.

The Committee will have to build on its rightful place within the local's progressive movement. This means reminding our brothers of the role women have played in the past in setting the agenda for the movement as a whole, as the Krikorian settlement and some of the sexual harassment and pregnancy disability battles did.

Now that the progressive agenda has become the fight against concessions and to save jobs, the Women's Committee will push to include the needs of women in the local—to save jobs, to ensure that any new negotiated layoff policies don't unfairly hurt women, and to see that women are well informed of retraining and educational opportunities. It will also be the Committee's responsibility to focus attention on the impact of the layoffs on women and on home life for everyone. And finally, as women continue to leave the local, their union knowledge and Women's Committee experience will go with many of them to benefit other sections of the labor movement in the area. ■