

Women Workers Uniting

Unite GPM Sector and USW Pulp and Paper Sector



2009

Sunday, 8th March

International Women's Day

www.internationalwomensday.com

International Women's Day is celebrated on 8th March each year. It aims to promote positive change and raise awareness about the problems women face in their everyday lives. **International Women's Day** is the story of ordinary women as makers of history – it is rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women to participate in society on an equal footing with men.

International Women's Day was first put forward at the turn of the 20th century during world industrialisation and economic expansion that led to protests over working conditions.

It is reported that women from clothing and textile factories in the USA staged a protest on 8th March, 1857. The garment workers were protesting against very poor working conditions and low wages. The protesters were attacked and dispersed by police. These women established their first labour union in the same month two years later.



Women of Steel



USW Women of Steel

Kim Smith and Julie Thorn, from USW's Paper Sector build power in the USW

page 2

Unite NEC Member, Louise Cousins, reports on behalf of the Unite delegation on the Canadian National Women's Conference

page 4

USW Women of Steel

from the Union's Paper Sector

Build Power in all Facets of the Union



Although Kim Smith and Julie Thorn work and provide leadership in the paper sector of the US, all union sisters represented by the USW are considered "Women of Steel" no matter which industry they work in. The phrase "Women of Steel" actually comes from the Women of Steel Leadership Development Course that trains and encourages union sisters to step up and become activists and leaders.

Traditionally, most industries and unions were male-dominated. Women of Steel is not about creating a separate organization for women. It is about providing a mechanism for women to learn how to become involved at all levels of the union as activists and leaders. It's also a network where union sisters can reach out, support and mentor those that may be a minority in their workplace.

Women of Steel Julie Thorn and Kim Smith are already union activists and have risen into leadership positions of their respective local unions. They understand the need to assist sisters that are just becoming active and both sisters provide activism and leadership in many facets of the USW.

Woman of Steel : Julie Thorn

Julie Thorn is a leader in her local union, which is an amalgamated local that serves a number of paper locations in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Julie works for Packaging Corporation of America (PCA) and is a vocal member of the USW PCA Union Council of local unions with members who work at PCA.

Julie was a leader in the Women's Network of the former Paper, Atomic, Chemical and Energy union that merged to form the USW in 2005. This activist organization of women was groundbreaking in PACE and focused on education on labor and women's issues. With the merger to form the USW in 2005, Julie has played a key role in developing Women of Steel in now District 2. She is a facilitator for the Women of Steel Leadership Development Course – a role that allows her to see sisters transform into leaders and activists.



Woman of Steel Julie Thorn (rear) hard at work at the Milwaukee Labor Temple phone bank just one week before the election making last minute calls to insure a Barack Obama win in the battleground state of Wisconsin.

"The course is about learning the union, building confidence and seeing the need for the special kind of activism that women bring to bear on the issues confronting us as working women," remarked Julie, who has been trained as a facilitator for the Course in District 2. *"The best part of the course for me, is seeing sisters blossom through the week of the course, develop life-long relationships and networks, and then seeing them step up their activism at events in the District."*

Julie contributed much to the USW's effort to elect Barack Obama as our next President of the United States. Through phone-banking, block walking and leafleting, she took the message to her fellow union members in the Milwaukee area. *"What I like best about political action is the opportunity to just talk to each other about the issues facing us as workers in this country. I was proud to play a role and put in the extra hours to change our country for the better,"* says Julie.

Woman of Steel Julie Thorn (rear) hard at work at the Milwaukee Labor Temple phone bank just one week before the election making last minute calls to insure a Barack Obama win in the battleground state of Wisconsin.

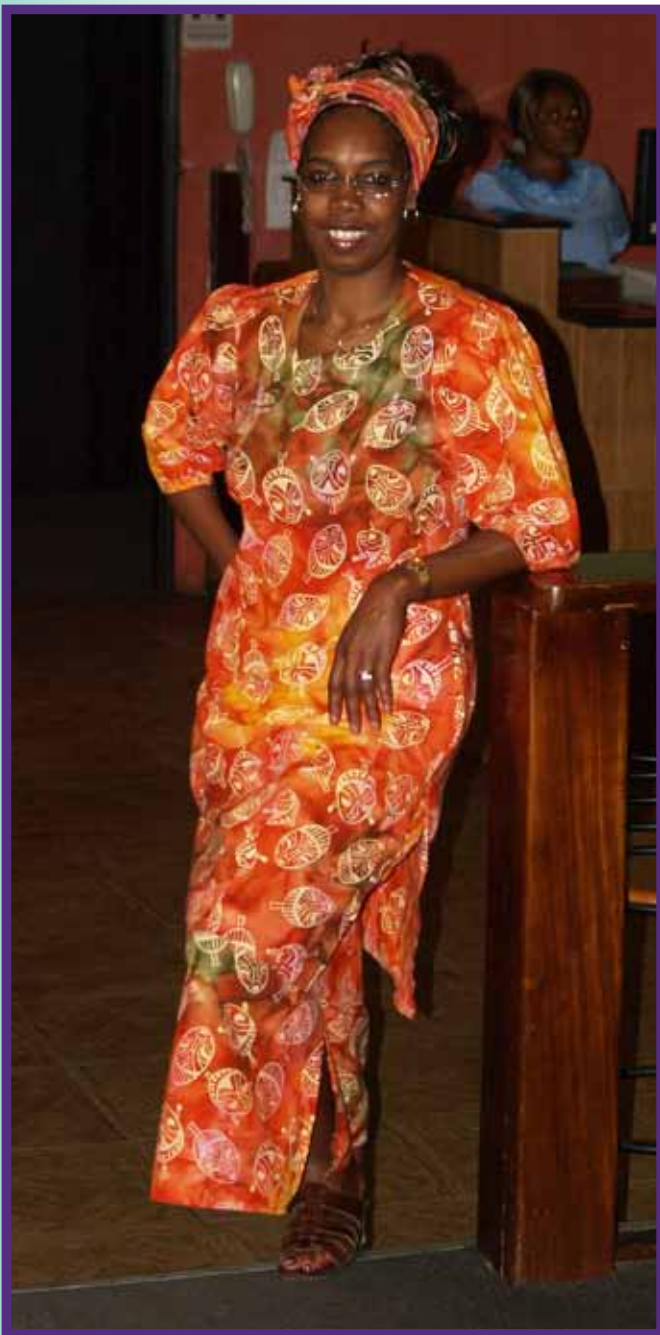
Woman of Steel : Kim Smith

Kim Smith, mother and grandmother, is a prime example of the tenacity, grit and determination present in all Women of Steel. Kim leads her local as President at the former MeadWestvaco (now KapStone) paper mill in Charleston, South Carolina, engaging in all forms of union representation and work. Kim was a key leader and voice in the USW MeadWestvaco Union Council. When Kapstone bought her mill they purchased only the paper operations where Kim works, while the chemical operations on-site, remained MeadWestvaco. She also conducts Building Power bargaining training for other local unions in the paper sector as a Paper SuperCAT.



Kim Smith readies for work in her hardhat and work uniform, a true Woman of Steel.

Despite all her activities for her local and in the paper sector, Kim also understands the need for international solidarity and take-it-to-the-streets activism. In 2007, Kim participated in and traveled to Liberia with a USW delegation in support of a free and democratic



Woman of Steel Kim Smith adopted the traditional dress of her Liberian trade union sisters while working to insure a free and democratic union for the workers at a Firestone rubber plantation.

union for workers at a Bridgestone Firestone rubber plantation there. Kim helped oversee an election that resulted in new union leadership made up of workers who labor at the plantation.

"This election was very important because it establishes democratic principles for the union and Liberia," said Kim. *"It was just one step, but it's a big one; and I was proud and honored to have a role in the elections and to help empower workers and set a new standard in another country."*

Later in April 2008, Kim continued her activist international solidarity work when, in support of the Women of Steel International Solidarity Initiative, Kim and USW union sisters representing 6 Districts across the U.S. and Canada traveled to Tijuana, Mexico, to participate in a joint Border Tour effort between the Sierra Club and USW Women of Steel. The sisters viewed first hand how NAFTA and other such trade agreements negatively affect workers and communities.

Tour participants met in San Diego and walked across the border. There they quickly learned that Mexican workers migrate to the Maquiladora region of Mexico with hopes of improving

their situation but soon realize that they will not climb out of the poverty they were trying to escape. They also learned of systematic pregnancy discrimination against women workers where pregnancy is frowned upon and women workers are asked to show sanitary napkins on a monthly basis. Women also endure kidney infections and other complications because they are not allowed to use a restroom unless a supervisor releases them. Company unions are most common; they are continuously exposed to dangerous toxins and dangerous workplaces where loss of fingers, hands, arms and eyes are daily occurrences throughout the factories.

The Maquiladoras zone has also taken its toll on the environment where the workers and their children live. Toxic and chemical waste dumps smelling of sewage surround the area where workers live in deplorable conditions. Highly contaminated waterways filled with lead oxides, sulfites, heavy metals, sulfuric acid, and arsenic weave their way through communities poisoning everything and everyone in the path, including the only water source.

"The sisters we met there made a plea to us to return to our communities and tell the stories of what we saw in hopes that someday there would be change," reported Kim. *"One sister even stated that 'before the Maquiladoras arrived, we lived better, we were not contaminated, and we were respected. Yes, we were poor, but we were much happier.' This opened up my eyes to what unregulated industry and trade can do to the workers who are on the other side of the equation, gaining the work, but paying a price."*

Kim also confronted the price of trade on American families by participating in the USW's Toxic Trade "Get the Lead Out" campaign where Women of Steel held events to publicize lead in imported children's toys and common household items. Kim led an event in her community, bringing her grandchild to symbolize those being impacted the most by imported toxic products and that unfair, unregulated trade not only affects those abroad but also our own families right here at home.

"Bottom line is," said Kim, *"I do this work on behalf of myself, my fellow workers across the globe, but mostly for our children and grandchildren so that they can have a chance at better lives."*



Kim Smith with Women of Steel sisters in Tijuana.

Kim's statement shows the special kind of commitment and tenacity that all Women of Steel bring to the roles in the USW. These two profiles of inspiring sisters in the paper sector are just a glimpse of the important role sisters play in USW and that we celebrate on International Women's Day together with our Unite sisters as part of Workers Uniting.

Unite Delegation to the USW Canadian National Women's Conference



Unite NEC Member, Louise Cousins, reports

As International Women's Day falls upon us yet again, it gives time for reflection.

Early 2008 saw me elected as a women's representative on the Unite National Executive Council. During early November 2008 I, along with sisters from both Amicus and TGWU Sections, were invited to be part of a Unite delegation to the United Steelworkers Canadian National Women's Conference held in Vancouver, BC, Canada.

The conference had a fully packed agenda each day commencing at 7.00 a.m! Sessions went on through to fundraising events held into the mid evening – and that was without the focus groups! From a personal perspective the conference raised great emotions of pure happiness to great sadness.

Conference heard women with "their stories". For example: Gabriela Barrueta, from the Autonomous University of Mexico, where cleaners are organising in the University against strong resistance; and in America from long distance women drivers still suffering adversity at work, to Joni Fraser, a logger from Canada, who spoke of seeing regional communities dwindling from approximately 700 people in a village down to less than 100 and the woeful effects of the disappearing papermaking and pulp industry in that region.

Throughout the conference the theme was "Sisters In International Solidarity" – yet it could so easily have been just simply sold as "International Solidarity".

From the opening by Elder Jeri Sparrow, from the Musquem Nation, whom welcomed all of us to her nation with a moving address, to Helena Tapio, Minister of Labour for Mozambique, who received rapturous applause when she explained her tactics with international companies.



We also heard from Carol Landry, who had become the first woman on the USW Executive Board as the USW International Vice President at Large, to our very own officer, Cath Speight, who informed conference of recent successful campaigns run by Unite in the UK, and finally to the very moving closing minutes where we were drummed to by Musquem girl group M'Girl who play in prisons to incarcerated Musquem women. Please think of these sisters too on International Women's Day, as I will be.

As we celebrate International Women's Day in 2009 let us build on existing networks, embrace internationalism and make it a working reality. The chance has been given for this dream to become reality by the formation of Workers Uniting, our Global Union, a union fit to organise globally.

Hope in their eyes

On a closing note – Unite women delegates were lucky enough to be in Canada especially to share with women from the USA the election of Barak Obama as President of the USA. I saw hope in their eyes. Let's keep working together to keep hope burning brightly in all corners of our world.

Unite: merged union provides opportunities

Lorene Fabian, Chair Unite Amicus Section National Womens Committee and TUC Womens Committee, writes:

"I welcomed the merger of the GPMU, Unifi, MSF and AEEU and now the TGWU to create Unite, as it presents an ideal opportunity to drive forward the issues that are of major importance to women in the UK and Ireland at a very difficult time, when a recession is biting. I urge women members in Unite and USW to play an active role within the women's structures of the unions to ensure our collective agenda is pursued within the union and therefore within the wider political area".



Find out more about becoming a Unite Equality Rep

by Siobhan Edean, Unite (Amicus) Head of Equalities

Unite is committed to improving the working lives of our members. Negotiating for equality, tackling discrimination and ensuring dignity at work are important issues for our union.

The new Unite rule book, which comes into effect in May 2009, contains a commitment to elect recognised Equality Reps in all workplaces who will fully participate in the union structures.

For these reasons the Equality Reps' Project was launched in February 2008 with matched funding from the Business for Enterprise and Regulatory Reform via the Union Modernisation Fund. The two-year project involves the development and training of 400 Equality Reps, after which Equality Reps and the training programme will be rolled out across the whole of the union in every sector and region.

Siobhan Edean, Project Manager and Unite Head of Equalities, comments: "Despite equality and discrimination legislation there is still a long way to go to ensure that all workers are treated fairly and with dignity and respect. Women still face a gender pay gap and discrimination in promotion opportunities. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and Disabled workers are also disadvantaged in the labour market in terms of unemployment and job opportunities. There is also much evidence of discrimination, bullying and harassment due to age, sexual orientation, gender identity and religion.

If the union is to make a difference we must take action in the workplace and ensure that achieving equality is central to the collective bargaining, organising and campaigning agenda at work. Equality Reps will receive full training on how to make this happen and will be equipped with the knowledge, skills and support to carry out their role effectively."

Tony Burke, Unite Assistant General Secretary, says: "I am keen to see the GPM Sector leading the way on the development of Equality Reps in the union. You may be an existing MOC or FOC who would like to take on the role – but you don't need to be – you may be a union member who wants to tackle inequality, discrimination and bullying in the workplace. If you are interested you can contact one of the Project Development Officers who can provide you with more information".



Unite Equality Reps' Project Development Officers:

**Karen Cole, karen.cole@unitetheunion.com
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**Melinda Phillips, melinda.phillips@unitetheunion.com
tel: 07764 655740**

**Wayne Lawlor, wayne.lawlor@unitetheunion.com
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They never looked back – reflections of workplace reps

Sarah Butler writes:

I am a 32-year-old machine assistant at Welton, Bibby & Baron where we print and manufacture any type of paper bag you can think of – but most importantly I am currently the MOC at the company.



I have been at Welton for nine years and a member of the union for the past eight years. I became a workplace rep about four years ago, partly because in the department I was in at the time there were only two fellow reps, and I felt it was something I would like to give a go.

Another reason was that my Father was an FOC at the book printers, Butler & Tanner, many moons ago. I haven't looked back since. I have met so many interesting people and had some really good experiences like marching through Bournemouth during the Labour Party conference and visiting Brussels to find out what really goes on in Europe.

Following that I decided that I would like to be even more involved in my own chapel. I decided to stand for MOC (Mother of the Chapel – senior union workplace rep). I was warned that I worked in a typically male environment and that I may not be in with a chance, but I have been the MOC for the last 6 months now, and although

it is hard work I LOVE IT. This year I will be working to bring the chapel together more, and encourage the younger generation to become more involved in the union.

So to anyone who is thinking about being more involved within their union I say: "Do it, it's an amazing experience".

Jane Levers, Union rep at Howitts, writes:

Like many others before me, I got involved at Chapel level. "What are we going to do about it" was my question. That show of interest was all it took. Before the meeting was over I found myself elected to the Chapel Committee.

I took my responsibilities seriously and soon found myself on a union training course and speaking at all sorts of union meetings. Following a chat with my FOC, I attended my first branch AGM as a delegate for the GPMU Central Midlands branch.

Again I raised my hand with questions and people from other chapels started to notice me because, before the AGM was over, I had been elected to the branch committee and a delegate to the GPMU National Delegate Conference. With the aid of my FOC, who made sure I met the right people, my life was expanded. I met our senior union officers, and many delegates who are now not only colleagues but friends.

I've gone on to attend several conferences, including women's conferences, and have not only joined in but enjoyed all of them.

And it all started with: "What are we going to do about it"!!

Women in Unions: report from South Africa

by Terri Miller,
Vice Chair of the Unite GPM National Sector Committee

In March 2008 I was fortunate enough to visit Johannesburg and Swaziland on a delegation for International Women's Day.

We met with the Head of Equalities from the Confederation of South African Unions (COSATU) and explained that Unite has worked closely, not only with COSATU, but also the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (CEPPWAWU), Unite's sister South African union. The delegation discussed equalities in South Africa.

COSATU have a National Gender Committee where members sit for two years. They look at issues on why women are not participating; why women don't attend union meetings; issues of organising, recruitment and discrimination.

COSATU also has a campaign to introduce life long learning and acknowledges that vocational experience is the key to help get a job and promotion,

HIV/Aids is a big issue on the African continent. There is a stigma attached to aids, perpetrated by ignorance from education that the mode of transmission is by blood, rather than behaviour which includes sexual transmission,



The Delegation with Lucia Matibenga from Zimbabwe

In Johannesburg the delegation was lucky to have a meeting with Lucia Matibenga, Vice President of the Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions. Lucia ran in the Zimbabwe elections for parliament in March 2008 and gained a seat. Lucia has suffered the atrocities that come with being a member of the opposition to Robert Mugabe and a trade unionist. Lucia told us that it was very difficult for women to stand in parliamentary elections. There is resistance against it. It is also difficult for women to attend meetings with responsibilities and they cannot pay for transport to attend meetings.

The delegation had been visiting Swaziland to celebrate International Women's Day. An organisation called Swaziland For Positive Living had organised a two day conference on HIV/AIDS and a march to incorporate International Women's Day. SWAPOL was founded in 2001 by five HIV/AIDS positive women after experiencing stigma and discrimination from their in-laws, families and community members. The organization currently has more than 1500 members, people living with HIV/AIDS in 30 communities. The organization is run by Sipiwe Hlophe who herself is HIV positive. In 1999 Sipiwe discovered she was HIV positive and as a result her husband left her and she lost an academic scholarship, but she reacted by co-founding the organisation SWAPOL. In 2007 she won an International award in the fight against aids

On Saturday, 8th March – International Women's Day – we arrived at Jubilee Park early in the morning. The march started at 8am and was led by the local town band – everyone was very friendly. The energy and vitality of these women puts us to shame, the age of women taking part ranged from teens to women in their 80s. The conference reconvened for the second day with an HIV testing station which gave an almost immediate result. There was a lot of information leaflets about violence against women, men for change and educating young children about sexual abuse. Conference was



Children from the orphanage



Women on the march

also joined by speakers from various organisations and Swaziland Government Ministers including the Deputy Prime Minister.

Next on the agenda was to visit the groups' economic programmes. SWAPOL has secured 11 hectares of land for growing a variety of crops to sell, to earn a living as most of People Living With HIV Aids are not in employment and they live below the poverty line.

Swaziland has active labour unions. During our time there we had meetings with various unions and other concerned civic organizations trying to bring about freedom and democracy in Swaziland.



Swazi women encounter substantial discrimination in both formal and customary law. Married women are considered legal minors, requiring spousal permission to enter into almost any form of economic activity. Only men can pass on Swazi citizenship to their children and female children have no right to inheritance under traditional law. The new 'constitution' grants women adult status and guarantees equality under the law. Violence against women is common despite traditional strictures against it and rape – regarded by many as a minor offence – frequently goes unpunished.

During 2008 events have led to deterioration between the government and civil society including women and unions. Demonstrations have taken place in towns, women and trade unionists have been attacked and beaten by police, and teargas has also been used.

International Women's Day is about sisterhood – it is about remembering women in the world, wherever they are, whoever they maybe and supporting their struggles.



Women working at the seedling farm

What is WORKERS UNITING?

Workers Uniting is the first global trade union created by a merger of Unite and the United Steelworkers.

Unite, the UK's biggest union, and the USW, the largest private sector union in the USA and Canada, reached an agreement in 2008 to create the first global union, called Workers Uniting, which will represent three million working people from every industrial sector in the UK, Ireland, the USA, Canada and the Caribbean.

The agreement to form a global union was initiated by the leaders of the two unions in response to the challenges of globalisation. In particular, the casualisation of employment and reductions in pay and conditions for millions of working people in North America and Europe.

A year in the making, the agreement will lead to the synchronisation of collective bargaining in companies with operations on both sides of the Atlantic. It will also enable joint political campaigning. Unite is the Labour Party's biggest affiliate and donor and the USW is a major contributor to, and supporter of, the Democrats in America and the New Democrats in Canada.

Derek Simpson, Joint General Secretary of Unite, said: "The political and economic power of multinational companies is formidable. They are able to play one nation's workers off against another to maximise profits. They do the same with governments hence the growing gap between the rich and the rest of us. With this agreement we can finally begin the process of closing that gap."

Leo W Gerard, USW President, said: "This union is crucial for challenging the growing power of global capital. Globalisation has given financiers license to exploit workers in developing countries at the expense of our members in the developed world. Only global solidarity among workers can overcome this sort of global exploitation wherever it occurs."

Tony Woodley, Joint General Secretary of Unite, said: "This agreement will enable us to use our considerable resources to organise workers from new and growing sectors at home and in developing countries. There will be no more no go areas for trade unions."

"The USW has a significant number of members employed in the pulp, papermaking and paper converting industries as does Unite. So it is logical that we should work closely together to make this merger work for the benefit of our members," says *Unite Assistant General Secretary, Tony Burke.*

The meaning of INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY



Gwynnda Charles, of the Wales Region GPM National Sector Committee, reflects on the meaning of the day

For me International Women's Day serves as a marker. A celebration of gains achieved in women's equality – but also a reminder of the negatives.

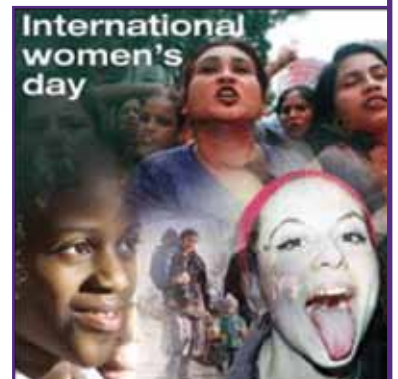
It also reminds us to ensure that any gains are maintained and improved in all aspects of life.

Yes, we should celebrate that we have more women in boardrooms, female prime ministers, and politicians, we even have women astronauts – in many Universities women outnumber men. You could say we have proved our worth!

The unfortunate truth is that women still do not enjoy equal pay in most cases nor are they present in equal numbers in business nor in politics. Across the world, women's education, health and violence against them is much worse than that of men.

I tend to focus on employment as an area of great inequality. Here we don't have an equal share of wages or power and this is what prompted me to become a union activist. I believe that as women we have to change our own destiny – in truth I gave up waiting for the blokes to shift a long time ago!

Anyway wherever you are on International Women's Day – give it 'ell and have a good one!



"We deal with the same multinational companies as Unite and at the recent ICEM Pulp and Paper Conference our unions sat as one delegation – sending a signal to employers that we intend to work as one," said *Jon Geenen, International Vice President of the USW.*

Workers Uniting will be a fully functional and registered trade union organisation in the UK, U.S., Ireland and Canada, with the ability to fully represent all of the members of its founding unions. It will be governed by a Steering Committee with equal membership from each participating union.

www.workersuniting.org

