

Labor History: The Women's Strike

By Ed Leavy

Nineteen Seventy-five was declared the "International Year of Woman" by the United Nations. Activities were planned throughout the world to celebrate the role of women in society. The women of Iceland had other ideas. At the time, Icelandic women made less than 60% of what a man made in the same job. Most jobs that women held were considered exclusively female jobs, and were given less respect. Social norms that were prevalent in much of the Western world at the time were strictly adhered to in Iceland: women were exclusively responsible for child care and domestic life. Many Icelandic women decided the "Year of the Woman" was a perfect opportunity to create change.

Women from across the political parties and the unions organized the event. It was announced that on October 24, 1975 women throughout Iceland were taking a day off from work, whether within or outside the home. The goal was to protest wage discrepancy and to show the indispensable role women played in Icelandic society. These goals clearly resonated with women; over 90% of women throughout the country participated. The strike began at midnight on the 24th. Newspapers could not publish, because most typesetters were women. Telephones in Iceland at the time still required operators, and because that was a traditional "female job," there was no phone service for the day. Schools had to close, because there were far too few teachers. Banks could only stay open if the male managers agreed to work as tellers. Even flights out of Iceland were suspended, because all flight attendants were female. A rally in the capitol Reykjavik drew 25,000 women – the entire population of Iceland at the time was 220,000 people, so over 11% of the people attended the rally – choking traffic and bringing the city to a halt.

While the strikes and the rally were very effective, what really brought attention was that women also refused to perform the in-the-home tasks as well. Men were forced to bring their children to work that day, creating chaos in offices throughout the country. Ready-made meals, cereal, and anything easy to prepare sold out throughout the country, and most restaurants were closed because the waitresses had struck. One of the goals was to show how indispensable women were in Icelandic society, and their point was clearly made. The following midnight, women returned to their jobs, and while everything seemed to have returned to normal, something had undeniably changed.

The results were not felt immediately. Women made only modest gains in wage equity. Every ten years on October 24, the unions and political leaders organized another general women's strike. In 2005, when there began to be some sliding back in gender equity, the unions redoubled their efforts and drew 50,000 people to an October 24 rally in Reykjavik. It took years, but the roots from the 1975 strike took hold. Many Icelandic women today point to that strike as the transformative moment of their lives, when they first felt a sense of empowerment and a sense of connection to other women that crossed class and political lines. For the sixth consecutive year, in 2014 Iceland was first in the world in income equity between genders.

The manner in which Iceland approached social and financial gender inequity differs greatly from how it has been addressed in the United States. Wage disparity has been handled in the U.S. in our typical way, through the courts and politics. Lilly Ledbetter sued Goodyear at the time of her retirement because she had earned far less in her lifetime than she would have had she had the same positions but been a male. The court crawled through the court system and was rejected by the Supreme Court in the usual 5-4 vote. The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was introduced in Congress, and despite intense lobbying by the Chamber of Commerce and similar groups, it passed in its second attempt in 2009. It is unclear if the legislation will help the U.S. improve wage equity. What is clear is that young people will not view the passing of the legislation as a personally transformative event, or be changed by its visceral impact in the way

young people were by the Women's Strike in Iceland. The legislation in the U.S. tinkers with the rules; the strike in Iceland changed lives.

Information from this article was gathered from numerous internet sites.