

BULLETIN

## Celebrating women's rights

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by MAUREEN ROSS

While serving six years on the HSA Board of Directors, I have written a number of these "Across the Province" reports on a variety of subjects. For my final report, I would like to explore with you the history of International Womens Day, celebrated around the world on March 8 of each year.

I wonder how many of us actually know how and when IWD became established as a day to celebrate womens victories, and renew our commitment to the fights yet to be won.

On March 8, 1857, garment workers in New York City staged a protest against inhumane working conditions and low wages. The police dispersed the protest with considerable violence. Two years later, in 1859, again in March, these women formed their first labour union to gain basic rights in the workplace.

Almost half a century later, on March 8, 1908, 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter work hours, better pay, the right to vote and an end to child labour. These women adopted the slogan "Bread and Roses" ... with bread symbolizing economic security, and roses a better quality of life. Two months later, the Socialist Party designated the last Sunday in February for the observation of National Womens Day. The first ever National Womens Day was celebrated Feb 28, 1909.

In Europe, a German socialist named Clara Zetkin proposed an international womens day in 1910. In March of the following year, International Womens Day was marked for the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland. More than a million women and men took to the streets to celebrate.

One week later, on March 25, the Triangle Fire took place in New York City. More than 140 young women ... most of them Italian or Jewish immigrants ... lost their lives when the Triangle Shirtwaist Company burned. Many of them jumped to their deaths when they were unable to exit the building due to inadequate fire escape routes.

The Triangle Fire highlighted the poor labour legislation and horrible working conditions of the times, and became a part of subsequent Womens Day observations.

Since those early years, International Womens Day has become a global celebration in countries around the world. In December 1977, the UN general assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming March 8 a day for Womens Rights and International Peace. There have been four global UN Womens Conferences to advocate for womens rights, and to make equality for women a growing reality.

The Committee for Equality and Social Action is committed to promoting and increased awareness of and participation in International Womens Day 2002. This year, as chair of the committee, I challenge all HSA members to participate in Womens Day events and celebrations in their communities. Contact HSA and tell us about events you are organizing or participating in.

It has been an interesting and educational six years as a member of the Board of Directors, and I am looking forward to my next year as chief steward at Kelowna Hospital. I would like to thank the members of Region 8 for their unwavering support and I wish my successor the best of luck.

*Maureen Ross represents Region 8 on HSAs Board of Directors.*

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