

Labor Day Thoughts

Push is coming to shove all over the country, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is but one of the states feeling the pressure. For two years our state legislature has been studying pay scales of state employees and seems now to be on the verge of recognizing the enormous disparities that exist between salaries paid males and those paid females. While it's no news to female employees in either the public or private sector, to legislators (who spent \$75,000 last year and will spend \$100,000 this year to study the situation) the facts apparently come as a surprise.

Under scrutiny are salaries for jobs which are not precisely equal but that may be valued as being of "comparable worth." For example, a male employee possessing minimal education and no skills (he may wash windows or wield a mop to clean corridors) earns an average of \$3,000 more a year than a typist who is a high school graduate...and female. Laundry workers at state hospitals (most of whom are men) earn higher pay than licensed practical nurses (most of whom are women). And secretaries with college degrees fill administrative positions that pay lower salaries than janitors or groundskeepers receive.

The legislature's study committee will determine whether the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is being violated. That act prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of sex.

Opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment argued that laws assuring equal rights for women were already on the books so no more were needed. Government statistics released recently confirm what many women have been asserting for years; i.e., almost without exception, men earn twice as much as women, across the board, in all categories, no matter how statistics are shuffled. Simply because men are males.

That the deciding factor is not race, nor religion, nor education, nor competency, but strictly a matter of gender is evident from the figures. Men with 8th grade educations averaged \$12,028 a year; women with similar education, \$6,159. Men with high school diplomas earned \$15,368; women, \$7,749. All men with post-graduate college degrees averaged incomes of \$27,660; women in that category, \$13,471. On the average, white men, age 45 to 54, with five or more years of college, earned annually \$36,520. Their female

counterparts? \$15,637. Black males of the same age group and educational backgrounds averaged \$25,801; and black women fitting that description, \$17,242.

This is not to say race does not affect salaries. Black men, taken together, averaged \$11,768; white men, \$17,609; black women, though, earned an average of \$8,113 while white women averaged only slightly higher wages overall, coming in at \$8,263.

With more than half of all women of working age now in the labor pool, and with more and more families depending upon a second income to meet living expenses, is it not time to put men and women on an equal economic footing?

And what might be reasons for not so doing?

The overriding reason, as far as public employees in Massachusetts go, is cost. It could cost the state between six and eight percent of its annual budget of \$8.1 billion to equalize pay scales. And, if the public sector begins paying salaries to women commensurate with those paid men, how long will it be before the private sector is pressured to adjust salaries to similar levels?

A nationally-recognized job evaluation consulting firm estimates that eliminating earnings disparities, nationwide, would cost \$320 billion a year and raise inflation by 10 percent. Attorneys for groups pushing for equal pay for women dispute those figures, pointing out that employers historically have argued against fair play just as they fought minimum wage laws and requirements for safe and healthy workplaces.

Whether compensating female employees fairly and on the same basis as males is costly or not is hardly the point. The valid question is, "What is right?" Equal opportunity laws have been on the nation's books for 20 years. Old arguments about men supporting families no longer apply today; millions of women hold down jobs to keep a roof over the heads of their children. Costs of fuel oil, property taxes, car and homeowner's insurance, food and clothing, are no lower for females than for males.

The economic disadvantages under which women work are, for those women who **must** work, overwhelming. And push is coming to shove.