UNIONS UNRECONSTRUCTED?

Men seem to have cornered the market in Australia Reconstructed. And the stakes for women are high. Here, in the first of a two-part series, Caroline King and Pat Ranald look at what's been left out.

**Public Concern**

The new strategy’s concerns could backfire on women, feels Pat Ranald.

*Australia Reconstructed* is not, and does not claim to be, a socialist or a feminist document. By this I mean that it does not argue for social or collective ownership of capital and other resources, nor does it argue for an end to the sexual division of labour or for society to be organised around feminist priorities.

What the document does is address current problems in the present Australian economy and argue for certain economic policies and directions.

The document focusses on Australia’s balance of payments problem; which is to say the fact that, as a nation, we import and borrow more from overseas than we export or is invested in Australia. This situation is worsened by the import of massive loans by the private sector for speculation and takeovers, rather than for investment in export or import replacing industries.

*Australia Reconstructed* argues for measures to increase investment in export- and import-replacing industries, to increase the productivity and competitiveness of those industries on the world market. Its attention is focussed mainly on manufacturing industries, and those aspects of the service sector which directly support them.

In the context of an economic debate dominated by the New Right with its emphasis on the free play of market forces, *Australia Reconstructed* is asserting an interventionist model of economic policy. It argues that economic policy should have clear social goals; full employment and greater social control over investment and industry policy.

Specifically, it argues for an enquiry into the effects of the deregulation of the financial sector; the creation of an investment fund specifically for investment in Australian industry; the creation of an employment and training fund; a more active role for government in industry policy (and particularly in encouraging appropriate research in development programs for industry); and long term planning and adequate resources for the infrastructure necessary for economic development.

This economic strategy assumes that growth in world trade will continue, and that some degree of consensus about achieving economic growth and social goals is possible between trade unions, the government and at least a section of employers.

There are many aspects of the *Australia Reconstructed* strategy which provide important levers for socialists and feminists in the current economic debate. With the federal Labor government adopting an increasingly free market framework in economic policy, arguments for comprehensive industry planning, employment programs and social expenditure are valuable.

The strategy assumes, but does not make explicit, an important role for the public and private service sectors. Because this is not spelt out, the strategy appears to overwhelmingly concentrate on manufacturing industry at the expense of other areas of the economy. While it uses Scandinavian countries as a model, and notes their very comprehensive health and social welfare programs, the recommendations at the end of the report do not reflect this.

As can be seen from the Scandinavian countries, any reorganisation and rationalisation of manufacturing industry involves more sophisticated technology and methods of production which actually employ less labour at the production level. The areas where employment has increased are new technology industries, the finance sector, communications, education, and welfare. The development and modernisation of manufacturing industry actually
The Wollongong women: a famous victory, but what of women outside manufacturing?

requires the expansion of all these areas, to develop both the technology and the training and skills they require.

From a feminist perspective, *Australia Reconstructed* fails to adequately analyse these service areas of the economy, which are precisely those where women mostly find paid employment. It does however recognise the specific needs of those women who *are* employed in manufacturing industry, in areas such as clothing, textiles and footwear, and light metal. It acknowledges that these women have access to a very narrow range of jobs and skills, and that they require both increased access to English classes and to affordable childcare.

What also emerges from the Scandinavian examples is that these countries have far more comprehensive social wage provisions than Australia. These include education and employment training and training programs, age benefits, sickness benefits, public health systems and so on. These are, however, funded differently than their Australian counterparts — primarily through insurance type schemes rather than from general revenue.

Women are major beneficiaries of these publicly-provided programs. Health, education, welfare and childcare programs all provide services which are crucial to women in their own right and as those who still bear the primary responsibility for child rearing. They also represent social provision of services previously often provided through women’s unpaid labour in the family.

Reductions in these services not only reduce women’s employment and training opportunities, but also increase the burden of unpaid labour they perform in the home. These services are, then, preconditions for women’s entry into the paid workforce.

Because *Australia Reconstructed* does not deal explicitly with these issues, its recommendations are skewed towards manufacturing industry at the expense of the essential expansion of the service sector as I’ve outlined above. The absence of a thorough analysis of the sexual division of labour in the document also means that its references to equal opportunity and childcare are not followed through in, for instance, the discussion on wages.

The recommendations on wages, which have been one of the most controversial parts of the document, essentially argue that wages should be set in the internationally traded goods sector and based on comparisons with major trading competitors, rather than based on cost of living or other criteria. For women, this would mean entrenching the existing gap between men and women’s wages, with no means of addressing it.

This and the following article are based on talks given to a Socialist Feminist Coalition seminar on *Australia Reconstructed* earlier this year.

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Catching the Right Train

Caroline King argues that the ACTU's ideas on training remain much too narrow.

The publication of *Australia Reconstructed* marked the beginning of a wide discussion among unionists, educationalists and government bureaucrats about what has been dubbed "skill development" or "skill formation". Since its publication there has been a deluge of government reports, semi-government reports, speeches, seminars, inquiries, submissions, counter-submissions and research papers about the relationship between education, training and the needs of the economy. The overwhelming majority of participants in this discussion have been men. A feminist perspective has been almost entirely absent. It's as though the years of "soft" equity policies are now over, and it's time for the boys to get back to their real job of serving narrow economic interests. I hope the discussion here will help to redress this imbalance.

The education and training argument in *Australian Reconstructed*, and evident also in the government's *Green Paper on Higher Education*, and in the 1987-88 budget document *Skills for Australia*, is based on the belief that "skill development" is central to reversing the economic downturn.

The first and most striking feature of the "skills push" is the fact that it is coming from the union movement. Not only that, it is coming from the traditionally protectionist "craft" unions in the metal industry. These unions, with their support of the apprenticeship system and the male trade culture accompanying it, have played a pivotal role in defining what "skill" actually means in industrial and social terms.

The major practical initiative which the metal unions are trying to implement is the restructuring of the Metal Industry Award. This proposal will create "career paths" between now distinct occupations — from process work to the so-called "journeymen" level, from there to technical fields and finally on to professional engineering. Apart from creating links vertically, the Metal Workers would also like to introduce the concept of "multiskilling". This means that the traditional and much embattled lines of demarcation between, for example, metal and electrical workers, would be broken down.

Also of great importance to women are suggestions that the Clothing, Textile and Footwear Award will also be restructured along the same lines as the Metals award. I am not familiar with the proposals in the CTF industry, so I will concentrate here on issues in the metal industry which are applicable broadly.

In general, the multiskilling/career progression approach could be fruitful for the workers involved — not least because it may head off what could be bloody and unsuccessful struggles with employers over demarcation issues. If career progression schemes work, it could offer some workers a way out of dead-end jobs into those formerly closed to them due to age restrictions and lack of educational opportunity. This is especially true if more learning can take place at the factory floor, and if such learning can be recognised not only by management for the purposes of salary increases but by educational institutions for the purposes of entry and credit in formal courses of more advanced study. This could give a value and recognition to workers' experience long overdue in the musty halls of academia.

But there remain a number of significant problems for women within the multiskilling/career progression package.

The first of these is that the majority of women workers in manufacturing occupy the jobs at the bottom of the ladder. Many of these women are also of non-English speaking background. They are more likely to have experienced educational disadvantage, such as early school exit, lack of social support to achieve academically, and a disjuncture between the culture of the school and of the home. Their ability to speak languages other than English, rather than being rewarded, will have been treated as a handicap both at school and at work. Clearly, the "training" required by women in process jobs will need to be sensitive to these issues. It will need to be broad-based and not narrowly machine-focussed, if employer rhetoric concerning "flexibility" and "worker participation" is to have any grounding in reality. Apart from communication and numeracy skills, a specific educational need for women is pre-trade skills, such as the use of tools and hand skills and confidence building in trade and technical areas.

Evidence from the Swedish government training authority (the AMU) suggests that most people in process jobs would require basic and general education before they could take advantage of company training schemes or off-the-job training. Training programs set up in Sweden...
entorced this lesson repeatedly: they were too ambitious, mainly because employers wanted to keep costs to a minimum.

Private companies are unlikely to pay for training to meet the general and preparatory educational needs of workers at the operator level. The training of employed workers is very expensive — people have to be replaced so they can "go off the line," and while people are undertaking training in practical tasks they are likely to use and "waste" more material.

Apart from the expense, there is the political fallout created by workers gaining basic education. There have been instances where such education provided on the factory floor, particularly English skills for migrant workers, has been stopped prematurely by the firm because the workers were "learning too much".

Clearly, workers themselves should have a right to say how much they should learn, and not be completely tied to learning the skills required to run a specific machine in one company, or restricted to learning only mechanised skills. Basic industrial rights can best be exercised if basic skills are acquired. Employers are well aware of the connection.

Therefore, in any skill development push supported by the union movement, the educational needs of the most powerless and vulnerable workers — that is, women, and women of migrant background — should be at the forefront, and they will need to be supported vigorously with the industrial muscle of the union as a whole.

The second problem for women is in the area of selection for company training schemes. The proposals put forward so far suggest that decisions about training will take place at the level of the individual firm. This means that, unless unions set up a joint committee with management, employers will decide who undertakes training and who does not. Even where unions are involved in making these decisions there is no guarantee that equal opportunity practices will be implemented so that women not only are selected to take part in training schemes, but also have access to special programs and opportunities to progress to the level of other workers.

The federal government's Affirmative Action legislation does not force private companies to implement strategies on behalf of disadvantaged workers. Unions also cannot be trusted to act along these lines without strong intervention from women.

A third issue is that proposed career progression schemes will tie employment and training much more closely together than they are now.

The implications of this change are easy to see if we look at the current apprenticeship system. Here, women are largely excluded: only a tiny proportion of apprenticeships are taken up by women each year. There are many causes for this — not least that we are brought up to think
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of the trades as a masculine domain. But above the ideological problems remains the fact that it is private employers, in the main, who select entrants to apprenticeships. It is employers who think they won't get their "value for money" if they indenture young women instead of men, especially in the "heavier" trades such as metal fabrication and machining, but also in electrical and other trades.

Young women have found some ways around employers' hesitation — often by undertaking full-time pre-apprentice training within the public education system. An alternative has also been to enrol in a technical course which is not tied to apprenticeship. Once women have gained their qualifications — say, in metallurgy or drafting — they have more chance of gaining employment. In areas of scarce labour supply, such qualifications can guarantee employment.

However, in a situation where training can only be undertaken if you are already employed — and if on-the-job training is integral to study at TAFE — we may find that women will face the same level of difficulty entering technical work as trade work. I'm not suggesting that women's participation in technical work is at the same level as men's, but merely that the introduction of apprenticeship-like structures in these fields could increase the problems we already face here.

Generally, the more employment and training are tied together, the more restrictive the situation for women would become, simply because the private employer, and not public educational institutions (which are at least open to community scrutiny) has to be relied upon to make the right decisions.

And here the obvious point has to be made — career progression schemes and skill development strategies only work if the skills workers have are recognised and if there is a job to advance towards. In many areas of women's work — in manufacturing and outside of it — the skill structure is "flat", and the factory small, allowing little variation in the work.

This means that the work involved, while it may require great skill, is seen to be "unskilled", and the structure is a narrow pyramid which nobody ever climbs.

This is not, of course, to say that where the skill development proposals can work, they should not be implemented (with the provisos already mentioned). But it is important to restate the point that the public recognition of skill and the rewards which such recognition accrues is still very much defined by the male-dominated trade union movement and by management. It is the lowest paid workers about whom we are most concerned, for it is they whose skills are not recognised because of their lack of social and economic power. For feminists, the most important task must be to argue for a redefinition of "skilled work" and for the recognition of women's work as skilled.

One of the most interesting facets of the debate on skill development for women could turn out to be the opening of a discussion about the links between schooling, TAFE training and higher education. One of the problems for advocates of Swedish-style training is that Australia has inherited British training systems and values. The lower value given to manual skills, indeed the distinction made between intellectual and practical work, is a major obstacle to the growth of a highly skilled workforce.

The apprenticeship and higher education systems together are powerful symbols of this distinction. Young working class people go into trades, clerical work or low-paid jobs in the service and retail industries, while the middle class people go into the professions. The schooling system, with its ultimate rewards reserved for academic achievement, rather than for excellence in vocational education, perpetuates this streaming.

Swedish systems differ markedly from those found in Australia. In Sweden, vocational preparation begins at school, and those who choose trade and technical work enter those jobs upon leaving school. There is no apprenticeship system. While streaming into intellectual and manual occupations on the basis of class still occurs in Sweden, it can be argued that there is more room for intervention on behalf of young women. This takes us back to the role of public education, and the strategies available in that area to overcome some of the restrictions placed on employer selection in technical and trade training.

Feminists may wish to reconsider the potential benefits of more realistic vocational training in the Australian school system. The danger is that, if proper equity safeguards are not in place, young women will make their vocational choice too early. Nonetheless, if the current skills training push advances beyond the level of discussion and into the area of actual change, it is clear that the academically-oriented schooling system that we know today will also be fundamentally reshaped. The federal government's pressures for "relevance" point in this direction. Reforms which the government enacts are thus not likely to have women's best interests as a guiding focus.

Rather than retreat into a defence of present structures, it may well be time to suggest changes which could give young women real vocational choice and a practical knowledge of their future in the workplace. This could only be achieved if young women's choices were not restricted to either academic study or study which leads only to low-paid and dead-end jobs.

An imaginative combination of vocational and broad education could revitalise concern for the quality and nature of working class schooling, particularly in terms of undermining the class-based gap between intellectual and manual labour. If young women were given adequate information and support, a widened school-TAFE curriculum could spark their interest in the otherwise closed world of their fathers' and brothers' workshops and laboratories.

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