

Female Industrial Organisation in the NSW Public Service Association (PSA), 1899–1999

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The Australian historical literature on women's work and industrial organisation has expanded considerably in the last twenty years. However, historical studies of office work, a major employer of women, are limited in scope, particularly in the public sector. Where public service women have been referred to, it is almost exclusively in the Commonwealth sphere. Historical accounts of the Australian equal pay movement have also tended to concentrate on the role of the Teachers' Federation and the Federated Clerks' Union, rather than of public service (non-teaching) industrial organisations.¹ Nevertheless, from an early stage the NSW public service was a major employer of women. Its main union, the Public Service Association (PSA), was also a major organiser of female employees at a very early stage, and as we shall see below, women played a major role within the union in their own right from the beginning.

In attempting to partially redress the neglect of female industrial organisation in the public sector by historians, this paper represents a preliminary assessment of broad trends emerging from a larger project for which research is as yet incomplete. The paper begins by examining the working conditions for women in the NSW public service, which encouraged the organisation of women within the PSA. It then traces the historical role of the PSA in attempting to improve these conditions, under the leadership of its women members. Finally, the paper assesses the impact of female organisation on the structure of the PSA itself.

Women's Work in the NSW Public Service

The NSW public service recruited its first women employees in 1895 as typists, shorthand writers and machine operators. In 1899 women became eligible for the first time to sit a competitive examination for permanent appointment to the clerical division, although only four women gained places in that year since the requirement of a school Leaving Certificate restricted entry in this way to a small minority. The Public Service Act of 1902 allowed the Public Service Board to 'make regulations for facilitating the employment of women in those Departments or Branches of the Public Service in which it may be desirable to employ them' (S41), but this ability was only slowly acted upon. The Board reported in 1902 that lack of suitable accommodation and other unexplained reasons had prevented it from employing women as clerical workers to any significant extent, except as shorthand and typing clerks for which 'as is well known, women have shown special aptitude'. Married women were specifically discriminated against from an early stage in public service employment, such that they normally could not gain permanent positions outside teaching until 1969.²

During the First World War, women entered the factories and offices in considerable numbers as a consequence of the shortage of labour created by the enlistment of men for the front. Principally, however, the growth in female public service employment during the war was temporary, with the expectation that servicemen would return to their original positions.³ However, the significance of temporary employment for women also persisted after the war. In the 1920s the Board increased recruitment of temporary staff, employed junior staff in preference to senior staff where possible, and created a new class of employee designated 'female office assistant' to reduce costs in the Public Service.

The female office assistants were intended to be assigned low-level clerical duties to allow male clerks to progress to higher duties. In 1922 it ended general entrance examinations for women's access to the clerical division, restricting women's entrance examinations henceforth to typists, shorthand writers and machine operators until 1948. This effectively closed access to permanent positions to many women, since permanency was only possible after examination. On the other hand, the examinations for typists, shorthand writers and machine operators were held infrequently and relatively few permanent appointments were made. Provision for transfer from temporary to permanent status was applied at the discretion of departmental permanent heads and the Board, who tended to apply it to men rather than women. By June 1924 there were 1378 temporary females employed in the public service. The Board explained their presence in the following way:

By a careful sorting out of the work and by the employment of female office assistants on the least valuable type of clerical work ... the Board has been able to manage with a greatly reduced number of qualified junior clerks.⁴

The number of temporary females continued to grow thereafter. By 1925 women represented 17% of total departmental employees, but about 82% of these were temporaries. By 1937 almost a quarter of public service employees were women, of whom about 85% were temporaries. Notwithstanding the fact that section 44 of the Public Service Act limited employment of temporaries to four months, many of these were long term positions. This situation essentially continued for the next half a century, despite a marginal broadening of possibilities for permanency in 1955.⁵

In 1974 separate eligibility lists for males and females were abolished. Nevertheless, in 1976 as the intake of female clerks increased, promotional positions remained 5 to 1 in favour of men. In the following year the first overall review of the NSW public service since 1918 resulted in the Wilenski Report, *Directions for Change*, which noted the widespread and deep seated structural inequality between men and women in the NSW public service, identifying the permanent/temporary status division, and occupational concentration as major problems. A number of reforms grew out of this report to address these areas.

However, by 1983 although women constituted a small majority, 51%, of NSW public service employees, 56% of these women had temporary positions only, accounting for 88% of all temporary positions in the public service. Ancillary staff in schools accounted for a particularly high concentration of these temporaries. Furthermore, as late as 1983, 99% of typists, stenographers and keyboard operators were women, as were 86% of school ancillary staff, 81% of cleaners, 79% of librarians and library technicians, and 68% of nurses and 42% of administrative staff. Of part-time employees who accounted for 12% of total departmental employment, 82% (7,882) were women.⁶ These patterns have changed only gradually and unevenly since.

The issue of equal pay for female public servants has also been long-standing. During the First World War female PSA members watched with interest a number of unsuccessful cases for equal pay for women before the Commonwealth Arbitration Court,

including some affecting Commonwealth female public servants. The family breadwinner foundation for the basic wage together with the cultural assumption that only males were family breadwinners, led to the setting by arbitration courts of a female basic wage at 54% of the male rate at this time.⁷ The other reason for lower women's wages was occupational segregation. Where only women worked in an occupation, as was common in the public service, it was usually lower paid than male occupations.

During the Second World War the federal government encouraged female employment to relieve labour shortages, and established the Women's Employment Board (WEB) in 1942. The WEB was empowered to increase women's wages where sufficient productivity and efficiency was demonstrated, although only a minority received wages over 75% of the male rate, with the average female rate at the end of the war corresponding to 60% of the male.⁸ In the NSW public service some women acting in male positions received increases up to 85% of the male rate, although the WEB declared that it lacked jurisdiction in the public service because it was not an industry within the meaning of the Act.⁹

After the war the ACTU's claim for 1949-50 Basic Wage Inquiry included a male basic wage for a family of five as well as the increase of the female basic wage to the same level as for males, although these two concepts were inconsistent. On the grounds that the male rate was for a family breadwinner, the Court finally fixed a female basic wage at 75% of the male.¹⁰ The ACTU's submission anticipated little else, and the equal pay part of its claim can only be seen as a sop for female unionists, with the major emphasis clearly upon the family breadwinner living wage for males which precluded equal pay. In NSW the eventual outcome was worse for women than at the federal level, notwithstanding an amendment to the Industrial Arbitration Act in November 1950 which prescribed that the female rate should be no less than the Commonwealth one. The NSW Industrial Commission decided in 1951 that the Commonwealth female basic wage really included a portion 'due to secondary considerations', and thus could not be considered a 'reasonable and proper basic wage for the assessment of rates of female employees under the Industrial Arbitration Act'.¹¹

The 1958 NSW Industrial Arbitration (Female Rates) Amendment Act introduced 'equal pay' for the first time in Australia. It provided that awards were to be changed so that margins for skill or other considerations were to be set without regard to sex where it could be shown that the work done was 'of a like nature and equal value'. In these cases the state female basic wage was increased to 80% of the male rate, and thereafter was to be increased by 5% per annum, until equal to the male rate at the beginning of 1963. The Act also provided that women should regain \$2 of their margins which the Commission had absorbed into their basic wage in 1950 when the female basic wage was increased from 54% to 75% of the male rate by legislation, a clause which was applauded by the PSA.¹²

The Act represented a significant gain for some women at least, but its impact on the inequality of wages between the sexes was limited by the fact that equal pay was not applicable to predominantly female work and the labour market was so segmented on a sexual basis. The major winners were teachers, whose union had been one of the most militant in pursuit of equal pay. But few others were able to relate their wage value to that of men in the same occupation, so that the Act 'was a blatantly sexist piece of legislation'.¹³ Women nurses had no chance of attaining equal pay with the small number of male nurses, but even amongst clerks few women gained equal pay because employers claimed that males and females performed different work in these occupations, or that women did not perform the full range of tasks undertaken by men.

In the state public service the existing sexual segmentation

of the workforce ensured limited application of equal pay. The Board chose to accord with the Industrial Commission's limited interpretation of the Act's provisions for equal pay. The Commission decided that 'the government did not intend any fundamental change in the system of wage fixation', asserting that 'a separate basis for the assessment of female rates is still prescribed as an integral part of the system of wage fixing in this country'.¹⁴ As Kramar notes, 'it assumed that women did not perform work of the same value as men and placed the onus on the applicant to satisfy the Commission that the women in question were performing work of the same or like nature and of equal value to that of males bound by the same award'. Consequently, the manner in which this equal pay legislation impacted upon the public service reinforced gender segmentation of labour, as it did in industry generally. As a result of negotiations between the PSA and the Board, most professional women received equal pay, paralleling the gains of teachers. Some women employed in the General Division and clerical officers in male graded positions in the Administrative and Clerical Division of the public service also eventually gained equal pay, but the majority of female public servants did not fall into these categories, particularly the large numbers of temporaries. Those who did not gain equal pay included shorthand typists, machine operators and office assistants in the Clerical Division. The PSA Women's Clerical Sub-Division estimated that the total number of women receiving equal pay by 1963 just exceeded 600, out of a total female workforce exceeding 12,000. In the NSW workforce covered by state awards as a whole, it was estimated by 1969 that only 14% had gained equal pay.¹⁵

In the federal sphere, the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission's 1969 equal pay decision of the Commission was equally disappointing for women, because as the *Red Tape* noted, the principle of 'equal pay for equal work' which it adopted essentially followed the same basis as the NSW legislation of 1958 with all of its limitations. Most women, therefore, were still denied equal pay, with the ACTU estimating that only 18% of the female workforce had gained equal pay by 1972. In that year the ACTU again applied for equal pay to the Commonwealth Commission with a supporting submission from the new Labor government. In December 1972 the Commission decided to phase in equal 'pay for work of equal value' over two and a half years (to June 1975). In principle, this decision genuinely sought wage equity between the sexes, by allowing the work value of traditional female occupations to be compared with other jobs. The ratio of female to male award rates grew dramatically, however, by 1995 the female proportion of male average weekly earnings for full-time employees employees remained at about 81%, due to the concentration of women in unskilled and part-time work, the slow recruitment of women into senior positions, and the greater availability of overtime in 'male' occupations. Decentralisation of the wage determination system was also beginning to widen the gap again by that time.¹⁶

Many employees, notably NSW public servants also were covered by state awards, and in NSW the male basic wage remained, whilst the equal pay issue was dealt with after 1972 on an individual award basis. In the NSW public service equal pay had to be fought for separately with each occupation and classification for women, and its introduction therefore was gradual. It also remained difficult in practice to entirely overcome the problems of a high degree of occupational segregation and traditional notions of worth associated with 'women's work'. For example, at the 1998 NSW Pay Equity Inquiry, one case study detailed the low salary still attached to librarianship, because of its traditional association with female work, to the detriment even of males as they increasingly entered the profession.

The sexual division of labour also condemned women to

the lower paid echelons of the public service in the vast majority of cases. To make matters worse, even where women were acting in the same positions as men, they did not receive equal pay for most of the century. As late as 1983, after equal pay had been instituted, the disadvantage of occupational segregation for women was obvious in the distribution of salaries. Women at that time accounted for 86% of the lowest paid third of all employees; or to put this another way, slightly over half of all female employees were in the lowest paid third of all employees but only 8% of males were.¹⁷

Women and the PSA

The working conditions described here provided strong motivation for early female union organisation. During the 1914-18 war the PSA consistently lobbied the Board for equal pay, equal entrance examinations, and equal opportunity of appointment to all public service positions, through a series of deputations.¹⁸ In 1915 there was some movement amongst female members to form a Women's Association which would be affiliated with the PSA, and a month later a provisional women's organising committee was formed. A joint committee to work for equal pay was established with the Feminist Club, which had been formed in 1914 by young university-educated professional women, public servants and artists, and also included Rose Scott and Jessie Street amongst its members. This link led to joint lobbying of the Public Service Board with the Feminist Club, Women Teachers' Club, Women's Progressive Association, Health Society of NSW, and the Professional Women Workers.¹⁹ The *Public Service Journal* also produced a series of articles for members on equal pay, feminism and prominent women public servants.

However, the male leadership and members of the PSA were also critically interested in the issue of equal pay from their own point of view. As noted in the PSA, 'the detriment to man labour of the service is something to be dreaded' from lower women's wages.²⁰ Nor did this enlightened self-interest prevent the PSA from being patronising at times. During one internal PSA debate in the 1920s concerning women's rights in the public service, the sentiment of a significant proportion of male members was expressed in the following statement: 'Women aspiring to the wage level that men attained only after long years of intensive organisation, be it said to them, in all sincerity, "Go thou and do likewise!"' Miss K. O'Keefe, of the Women's Clerical Sub-Section, remarked that 'she had come to the conclusion that men could not be trusted at all'.²¹

At the end of the war the equal pay campaign continued under new circumstances whereby the PSA had access to the NSW Arbitration Court rather than relying on Board determinations. The *PSJ* published a series of articles relating to equal pay and the status of women in the public service, with references to overseas developments, and in 1923 a women's page was introduced to the journal. At this point women accounted for 9% of total PSA membership.²² In 1920 a petition from women in the public service called for a full cost of living increase to the female basic wage. A meeting of women public servants also resolved to ask the PSA to include three women members on the committee charged with drawing up the union's first log of claims, so that they could press home the woman's point of view. This meeting defeated a proposal for a women's branch of the PSA, as well as a motion to establish a public service women's association independent of the PSA. However, from 1921 the *PSJ* referred to a Women's Section of the PSA, although there was no specific reference in the constitution and rules of the PSA to it. At this time the PSA also adopted as an object 'to secure equal payment of officers regardless of sex'.²³

In the PSA's first award case it sought recognition of the principle of equal pay for equal work, with evidence from the

president of the Women's Section.²⁴ However, the PSA did not consider that the issue was taken seriously by the Court, which instead created a 'career scale' award for female only shorthand writers and typists and for female clerks. Subsequently, PSA women decided to appeal the Court's rejection of equal pay for equal work in the Clerical Award.²⁵ When the Full Court rejected their appeal in May 1922, they were also severely critical of the PSA's handling of the original application for a Clerical Award and of the subsequent appeal, to the extent that some again spoke of breaking away from the PSA.²⁶

In October 1929 the PSA's general secretary, Fred Wills, delivered a strong statement of support for equal pay at the Perth Conference of the Australian Public Services Federation (APSF). During the conference discussion on the issue, the PSA president, W.A. Flynn, was reported by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as making derogatory remarks which infuriated the female members of the PSA.²⁷ Although Flynn denied ever making this statement, the outcome was a protest meeting of PSA women members on 31 October 1929. A further meeting of about fifty PSA women members was held in February 1930 to consider a proposal to form a full formal Women's Section of the union. The meeting was chaired by the PSA president, Flynn, and other male members of the executive also participated. Flynn, noting the significant number of female PSA members, proposed the creation of a separate Women's Section, entitled to two representatives on executive, as well as Central Council and annual conference representation. This would have been equivalent representation to that of the existing PSA Sections which paralleled the public service divisional structure: Professional, Administrative and Clerical, and General. However, Flynn's motion was opposed by other male members of the executive, and the women were also divided. Some considered that women in different existing Sections had more in common with the men of their own Section than with women in other Sections. Flynn's motion was lost 24-15.²⁸

Subsequently, in 1930 the informal Women's Section became the Women's Auxiliary of the PSA. The first meeting of the Women's Auxiliary was on 6 May 1930, attended by 40 women. A new clause in the PSA constitution read:

An Auxiliary, known as the Women's Auxiliary of the Public Service Association, shall be constituted consisting of all members of the Association irrespective of the Section to which they belong. The Auxiliary shall watch the interests of the women generally, and deal with questions which are peculiar to the women of the Service. The Auxiliary shall hold at least two general meetings each year, at one of which a representative for the Executive shall be chosen in time for presentation at the Annual Conference.²⁹

Until 1930 there had been no representation on the executive or Council for women in their own right. Two women from the Auxiliary sat on Council from 1930, in addition to female delegates of the Clerical and General Sections. A representative of the Women's Clerical Sub-Section also gained a place on the Council and at Conference prior to 1930, as one of seven delegates from the Clerical Section.³⁰ The numbers of women members soon justified a second Women's Clerical Sub-section delegate to Council.³¹ In the 1930s the female proportion of PSA membership grew to 20%.

During the 1930s depression the PSA was forced onto the defensive concerning wages. In May 1930 the Nationalist government reduced public servants' salaries by 8 1/3% across the board, and they were reduced further by the effect of living wage reductions before the arbitration courts. In the context of high unemployment and possible replacement of men with cheaper females, equal pay remained a priority, and support for it grew throughout the union movement, particularly as male unionists feared that employers favoured cheaper female labour to male labour where they had a choice.³² For women public servants on

wages which were already low, the general reductions to service salaries hit hard. The PSA campaign for salary restoration, therefore, focused especially on the low-paid, including women and juniors.³³ In 1934 together with the United Associations for Women the PSA called for an inquiry into the living wage for women.³⁴

Towards the end of the 1930s the equal pay campaign regathered momentum within the PSA and the union movement generally. Full salary restoration was gained by NSW public servants in June 1937. A month earlier the Council of Action for Equal Pay was formed by resolution of a conference of 53 organisations convened by the NSW branch of the Federated Clerks' Union. The Council developed a national campaign for equal pay and status in the workplace, lobbying politicians and supporting unions which undertook action for equal pay. The Labor Council of NSW was a major supporter, sending delegates to the inaugural conference and endorsing its decisions, joining a deputation to the Premier over the issue, and condemning Sydney City Council for dismissing married women. Jean Arnot from the PSA was also one of the original delegates to the Council, and later in 1937 delivered the first of many public speeches on the issue of equal pay.³⁵

In April 1937 the PSA conference confirmed the issue of equal pay for equal work as a fighting plank of the PSA. The Australian Public Service Federation (APSF), of which it was an affiliate, also reaffirmed the policy.³⁶ For the PSA the situation for its female members was worsened by three factors. First, the Public Service Board classified and reclassified some female positions so that they came within the jurisdiction of lower paying awards. Secondly, the State government had refused to pass on to women the prosperity allowance granted to federal awards in 1937, after promising to do so immediately prior to a by-election. The PSA also considered that the Board had a deliberate policy of replacing permanent males with female temporaries, which it unsuccessfully attempted to curb.³⁷ The Women's Auxiliary strongly promoted the issue within the union at this time, with substantial support from the President, George Weir.³⁸ Jean Arnot noted that the Soviet Union was the only place where equal pay was widespread practice.³⁹

Industrial and political activity occurred on a number of fronts in 1937-38. Late in 1937 the PSA unsuccessfully applied to the NSW Industrial Commission for the full State basic wage to be passed onto women under the two awards covering permanent clerical and temporary clerical staff, on the grounds that the amended Act of that year did not specify any partial rate for women, and that the lower rate encouraged cheap female labour. The 1938 and 1939 annual conference also resolved to seek redress for the large numbers of temporaries,⁴⁰ but without any great impact. The PSA sent delegates to the first interstate conference of the Council of Action for Equal Pay early in 1938, and Weir was joint President of that organisation with Muriel Heagney during its first year. The Council supported an equal basic wage for women, introduced in stages if necessary, and equal margins for skill. It also organised a petition for the federal parliament for the inclusion of a clause guaranteeing equal pay in the Commonwealth Constitutional, although this was not successful, and even the PSA was disappointed with the number of its members who were apathetic in this regard. In 1938 the PSA called on the state government to lead the way as an employer, setting an example for the private sector to follow.⁴¹

The PSA's organisational activities amongst women gathered momentum in the Second World War. In 1940 the PSA appointed a 'lady organiser' to conduct a membership drive, and in 1942 it extended Women's Auxiliary representation on the Executive to two and Central Council representation to three.⁴² The PSA continued to promote and play an active part in the Council of Action for Equal Pay, with the PSA president, C. Drummond

becoming joint president with Miss Small in 1940, and Miss Dunne and Miss Arnot from the PSA were appointed as assistant secretary and convenor of the Council's research commission.⁴³ Soon after the Labor Council of NSW pledged support for equal pay in 1940, the PSA appeared with twelve other unions and the Council of Action for Equal Pay in support of an application to the state Industrial Commission by the Clerks' Union for an award covering office assistants in metropolitan retail shops. The application was considered to have direct bearing upon PSA members in the Lotteries Department. George Weir, the PSA's former president, appeared as counsel for the unions. In its decision the Full Bench of the Commission stated that 'there was considerable force in the argument that, as the legislation stands, the matter raised is not one for the Commission, but for Parliament itself'. The Commission noted that equal pay had widespread social and economic implications for the structure of employment and the 'purchasing power of money', but it did not consider it appropriate 'at this juncture of our national life' to undertake such fundamental change, and so it stood the application over until a more appropriate time.⁴⁴

The PSA also quickly sought WEB intervention to gain equal pay for women acting in men's positions. The WEB directed it and the Board to confer, whereupon the PSA rejected the Board's offer of 85% of male salaries with an examination barrier which would have effectively excluded most women. Eventually, the WEB agreed with the Board that it lacked jurisdiction in the public service.⁴⁵ However, from 1942 the Public Service Board invited female clerical employees, temporary and permanent, to file claims for wage increases based on material changes or substantial increases in responsibility in the nature of their work as a result of the absence of male clerks. These claims required endorsement by the departmental permanent head before consideration by a joint PSA/Board committee, where the PSA was represented by Miss D. Beveridge of the Works Department.⁴⁶ These arrangements, however, did not prevent the growing use of women in administrative positions without receiving the male wage. In late 1943 the PSA complained of 'the further exploitation of cheap female labour which has been markedly noticeable in clerical vocations within the Public Service Board's jurisdiction'.⁴⁷ Women were asked to bring to the union's attention instances where they believed that they were being unfairly paid because they were doing 'male' clerical jobs.⁴⁸

Throughout the war the PSA sought longer term solutions to the equal pay issue by addressing occupational segregation. During 1942-44 the PSA campaigned vigorously over the position of temporary clerical women, seeking their transfer to the permanent staff after two years' employment. The numbers of temporary female office assistants more than doubled during the war. After an impasse in negotiations with the Board the PSA went to the Industrial Commission, but with little joy achieved there. From 1939 the PSA also lobbied the government for the re-introduction of girls' eligibility to compete in exams for the Clerical and Professional Divisions, as they had been allowed to do from 1915-22, finally achieving success in 1948.⁴⁹ As the war drew to a close the PSA and its women activists intensified their efforts for equal pay, as did women in other unions, although, immediately after the war only small gains were made with pay rises for some women, well short of equal pay. PSA women accounted for 25% of all PSA members in 1945.

The forces arraigned against the equal pay campaign were formidable. None other than F.A. Bland, the Professor of Public Administration at the University of Sydney, cited figures in the *Sunday Telegraph*, which purported to demonstrate that women preferred repetitive public service jobs, and were unsure whether to return to work after getting married.⁵⁰ The Trade Union Equal Pay Committee claimed that lack of progress

for equal pay was due to the low level of trade union membership amongst women and the absence of any significant female parliamentary representation.⁵¹ However, the ACTU's self-contradictory application to the 1949-50 Basic Wage Inquiry, which included a family breadwinner basic wage and equal pay, indicated some limitations in union support for equal pay. The case aroused great interest in the PSA. However, the PSA seems to have anticipated the more limited actual outcome in arguing for a 75% female rate. Even then it was 'amazed at the lack of support from other industrial organizations catering for women's interests, and was left - except for the representative of the Bank Officers' Association - to carry the fight alone'.⁵²

The equal pay campaign re-gathered momentum again from 1955. In that year a PSA delegation presented the case for clerical women to the Public Service Board, and the PSA was represented by Mavis Woodford on a union Equal Pay Committee.⁵³ In November 1955 the PSA sponsored the formation of the Combined Equal Pay Committee and hosted its inaugural meeting under the banner of 'rate for the job', with delegates from unions, including the Teachers' Federation and Nurses' Association, and from women's organisations. The meeting unanimously endorsed Miss Hoy's (PSA) motion for seeking guarantees from the parliamentary leaders of each state party that they would immediately take steps to implement the 1951 ILO Convention on Equal Pay, and that a statement of their views on the matter be sought from each candidate in the forthcoming state elections.⁵⁴

The formation of the union Equal Pay Committee under the auspices of the Labor Council of NSW in 1955 and of the Combined Equal Pay Committee of unions and other organisations indicated the broadening of support over the issue. Jean Arnot of the PSA at this time was also federal president of the Business and Professional Women's Club, which was actively lobbying federal parliamentarians for equal pay. The APSF again reaffirmed its commitment to equal pay in 1956.⁵⁵ The ACTU organised a Federal Unions Conference on the issue of equal pay in 1956, which the Labor Council urged should be reassembled on a broader basis the following year. The Labor Council's Equal Pay Committee also requested in 1957 the ACTU 'in all future basic wage claims to incorporate the common basic wage irrespective of sex'.⁵⁶ The PSA fully supported its organisational activity for equal pay with an extensive propaganda campaign in the mid to late 1950s, in the pages of *Red Tape* and in radio broadcasts. During 1957-58 the PSA led intensive lobbying of the federal government for a tripartite committee to examine the issue of equal pay.⁵⁷ Failing there it re-focused upon the state sphere of politics, where the influence of the Labor Council was critical in gaining action from the NSW Labor government. In January 1958 female clerical officers gained 85% of the male rate. Most importantly, as a result of PSA and Labor Council lobbying the state Premier (J. Cahill) announced in March 1958 at a conference of working women organised by the ACTU that it would legislate for equal pay before the end of the year. This announcement attracted 'a terrific campaign ... launched by the press, presumably on behalf of advertisers and others who were profiting by the continued exploitation of cheap female labour'.⁵⁸

The PSA and its Women's Auxiliary considered the 1958 NSW *Industrial Arbitration (Female Rates) Amendment Act* a major gain, although they were under few illusions regarding its limitations and the agreements which passed on these gains had to be firmly pressed upon the Board. The Act was seen as a 'first step towards the achievement of a major social reform', and it was noted that 'New South Wales has again led Australia in the field of industrial justice'.⁵⁹ Negotiations with the Board for the implementation of the equal pay provisions proceeded unevenly for different

classifications covering women over the next six years.⁶⁰ Much of the PSA's attention, and particularly that of its Women's Clerical Sub-Division was taken up with regrading, through the Grading Committee composed of representatives from the PSA, including its Women's Clerical Sub-Division, and the Board.⁶¹ The Grading Committee considered applications from employees for reclassification or promotion, and for women this was a major means for the implementation of equal pay for individuals, particularly after the state equal pay case. In addition, a joint PSA/Board committee was established in 1962 to define the shorthand typists, machine operators and office assistant classifications and their relationship to male officers' positions.⁶²

At the same time that the PSA sought implementation of equal pay in the service, it was fighting a general salary campaign in 1959. Photographs in *Red Tape* indicate that women members were numerically significant at campaign meetings.⁶³ Photographs from an earlier era of mass meetings in the 1930s, show few women. It seems that the equal pay campaign mobilised women members of the PSA in the late 1950s to early 1960s. This mobilisation was no doubt assisted by the visits of female executive members to country centres from 1958, paralleling the PSA executive's annual country tour.⁶⁴

At the PSA Annual Conference in April 1959 Millie Hoy moved to campaign for a woman to be appointed to the Public Service Board, but was defeated by 53 to 52 votes. One male member from the Public Works Department wrote an article strongly critical of the 53 delegates who voted against this motion, declaring 'Wake up, you hidebound anti-feminists! Wake up and consider'.⁶⁵ The PSA did, however, approach the Board for the appointment of a female inspector to the Board's staff. The Board's negative response referred to the lack of experience of female public servants in areas and at levels suitable for appointment to the Board, to which the PSA responded that it should 'ensure that the opportunity be given to the female members of the Service to obtain the necessary experience to fit them for selection as an inspector on the Public Service Board'.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, in 1961 the Board did appoint a female inspector for the first time.⁶⁷

The organisational momentum for the equal pay campaign spilled over into expanding the presence of women in the structure and operations of the PSA more generally at this time. Women's Auxiliary representation on Central Council increased from three to four as a result of expanded representation on the executive. By 1963 the representation of the Women's Sub-Division of the Clerical Division also had been increased.⁶⁸ Notwithstanding these organisational advances, however, the photographs of annual conferences reproduced in *Red Tape* during the early and mid-1960s reveal a very sparse representation of women amongst the delegates.

Although Ryan and Conlon considered that the 'equal pay campaign in New South Wales received no further encouragement from the official trade union movement' after the equal pay Act,⁶⁹ the Labor Council's Equal Pay Committee remained active in organising meetings to evaluate the position of particular groups of women, and possible amendments to the Act to expand coverage. Mavis Woodford from the PSA had become secretary of this committee. In August 1959 a special ACTU Equal Pay Conference was organised in Melbourne to coincide with the ACTU Biennial Congress. It constituted an Interstate Committee, to which Mavis Woodford was elected, and this committee organised a second Equal Pay Conference in Melbourne in February 1960. Arising from this, a second petition for equal pay was organised, and presented in September 1960 to the federal government. The ACTU's Interstate Committee also instigated Equal Pay Week for March of 1960, and April of subsequent years. Public functions

and meetings for national Equal Pay Week were organised at a state level, mainly through the Labor Council in NSW. However, it was a nationally coordinated week, which was intended to renew emphasis on the Commonwealth sphere as the main focus for attaining equal pay.⁷⁰ New Zealand legislation appealed to the equal pay movement in the public service as a model at this time. In 1961 New Zealand female public servants gained equal pay for equal work where they worked with men, as in NSW, but also in female occupations 'regard shall be had to the scales of pay for women' whose wages were comparable to men's. The PSA and APSF adopted this as their definition of equal pay in a continued propaganda campaign and lobbying with government right up to the Equal Pay Cases of 1969 and 1972.⁷¹

Another issue of growing concern was the discriminatory practice of barring appointment to permanent public service positions for married women. In 1961 unsuccessful submissions were made to the Board for removal of this barrier. In 1966 the Commonwealth legislated to grant permanency to married women in the federal public service. This encouraged further lobbying of the Board by the Women's Auxiliary for a similar state policy.⁷² The 1964 annual conference of the PSA also resolved to seek permanent appointment for school clerical assistants (ancillary staff) who had five or more years of service.⁷³

As with equal pay principles, the PSA achieved significant gains in these areas subsequently. By the end of the 1960s the bar on employment of married women had been lifted. School ancillary staff finally gained full-time permanent positions in 1997, and from 1995 major improvements in pay. During the 1990s the PSA also gained pro rata entitlements for part-time staff to superannuation, long service leave, flexitime, and maternity leave. This was a major gain in the context of growing deregulation and part-time employment.

In 1973 the Women's Auxiliary became the Women's Council. The name change reflected the growing influence of a revived general women's movement, and of a new, more assertive and socially radical generation of public service women, often university educated. The proportion of total PSA membership who were women also exceeded 50% by the mid-1980s. From this time the issues of workplace discrimination and sexual harassment became more important in the union, to an extent which threatened many of the more conservative male members of the union. At the 1981 Annual Conference a narrow majority of delegates voted to abolish the Women's Council, following a vigorous debate on workplace sexual harassment, EBO, and the use of 'Ms' as a title for women. To become effective, this policy motion required a motion for rule change, but that required 60 days' notice, which meant that it was postponed until the next Annual Conference. In the interim, the Women's Council mobilised support with a concerted campaign at workplaces and in the forums of the union. The 1982 Annual Conference reversed the previous year's policy motion.⁷⁴

In the long term this experience had a major impact on the nature of the PSA as a whole, because the Women's Council catalysed a broader radical challenge to the policies and very structure of the union. The traditional PSA structure was based on its four sections, renamed Divisions by this time,⁷⁵ which operated as semi-autonomous bodies, where it was difficult to pursue workplace issues because the staff affected would frequently be spread across a number of Divisions. The Divisions were the basis of all union representative structures, although their membership was very uneven. They also were highly factionalised, with Administrative and Clerical and General being dominated by right wing Labor. Government Agencies and Professional Sections were much more susceptible to left wing influences, Labor and Communist,

and these sections were precisely those where the new generation of women activists were largely based. Any proposals to improve workplace organisation and the representativeness of union bodies, or to change policy in significant ways, had to confront the entrenched Divisional hierarchies of the union. Linking up with reform groups in all sections of the PSA, this is precisely what the Women's Council did. At the same time, its task gained momentum in the 1980s from the creation of a unified career grades structure throughout the public service by the abolition of the public service divisions upon which the PSA Divisions had been based.

The 1981 Annual Conference authorised the establishment of a restructuring committee to examine other unions and develop possible models for change in the PSA. This led to a special Structure Conference in 1983, which adopted workplace groups (WPGs) as a basis for organisation. At that point, with their separate workplace delegates conference and representation on an expanded Central Council, the WPGs representative structure paralleled the existing Divisional structure of the union. This was an expensive and unwieldy structure, which was only seen as temporary by the Restructuring Committee before further change. Again, their hand was strengthened by changes in the public service itself which saw greater devolution of managerial responsibility to the Departmental level. The 1986 Annual Conference adopted a structure of Departmental Committees in addition to WPGs, with the implicit understanding that this would lead to the abolition of the Divisions. All of the PSA's representative structures have since been based on Departmental Committees and WPGs.

The Women's Council provided much of the driving force for this structural change. Key Women's Council members constituted a majority on the Restructuring Committee. Ironically, the representative basis of Women's Council was itself altered again as a result of the union's general restructuring, so that Women's Council representation on Council remained at four, but its executive representation was reduced to two.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Women's Council provided continuing leadership in the new structure, with one of its activists, Janet Good, becoming the PSA's first female president in 1987. The year before, Helen Twohill became the first female general secretary. Both lost power to a right wing ticket in 1989, but in 1991 Good returned as president, and in 1993 she became general secretary.

Conclusions

For most of the twentieth century the NSW public service maintained a dual labour market based on a rigid sexual division of labour. Women were usually denied access to the permanent employment and the career structures enjoyed by most males, they were occupationally segregated to a great extent in positions which received inferior classifications, and they suffered considerable pay inequities. These conditions motivated a high degree of union membership and activism amongst women from an early stage in the PSA. As a result, the PSA played a prominent part in the broad union campaign for equal pay. It was also consistently active over a long period in attempting to improve and abolish the secondary labour force status of women generally in the public service. In this area it had achieved considerable success by the end of the century, although its travails were very long.

The basis of women's successful organisation within the PSA warrant further examination. The high proportion of female employees in the public service, the PSA's strong industrial coverage, and the high proportion of female membership of the union were all necessary factors for successful female organisation, but in themselves scarcely sufficient. Operating in the relatively 'genteel' environment of the public service, which produced an affinity with procedural matters and a high expectation of

controlling the workplace environment by regulation and political influence, may also have been important factors. Others were the high calibre of leadership of women in the PSA, the support from key male officeholders at particular stages, and the ability of PSA women to establish a structural stronghold within the union from which they were able to gradually expand. This provided the Women's Council with a strong cohesive base from which to influence PSA responses to public service restructuring at the end of the century, unencumbered by the structural weakness from which the traditional PSA Divisions suffered.

Endnotes

- 1 E.g., E. Ryan and A. Conlon, *Gentle Invaders. Australian Women At Work, 1788-1974*, Nelson, Sydney, 1975, pp. 145-75.
- 2 D. Blackman and L. Carruthers, *Report Requested by the Women's Council of the Public Service Association of NSW on Matters Relating to Women's Employment in the NSW Public Service and Statutory Authorities in Relation to Overall Questions of Union Structure*, PSA, Sydney, 1983, pp. 3,7.
- 3 *Public Service Journal*, (journal of the PSA) November 1915: 2; Blackman and Carruthers, *Women's Employment in the NSW Public Service*, pp. 3, 5.
- 4 Cited in Blackman and Carruthers, *Women's Employment in the NSW Public Service*, p. 5; also pp. 3-4.
- 5 *Red Tape*, (journal of the PSA) May 1937: 134; June 1937: 144; August 1937: 201; May 1938: 97; April 1939: 104-05; June 1939: 159; PSB Annual Reports for 1925, 1937. Blackman and Carruthers, *Women's Employment in the NSW Public Service*, p. 5.
- 6 *ibid.*, pp. 4, 8-9.
- 7 See Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, pp. 98-104; *PSJ*, July 1917: 30.
- 8 D. Mitchell, 'Wages and Employment', in Caine et al., *Australian Feminism*, pp. 357, 361; Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, pp. 124-38; Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Labour Report* no. 46, pp. 77-80.
- 9 Blackman and Carruthers, *Women's Employment in the NSW Public Service*, p. 3; *RT*, January 1946: 866.
- 10 Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, pp. 140-41; *Commonwealth Labour Report* 1962/63, no. 50, p. 106.
- 11 *Commonwealth Labour Report* 1962/63, no. 50, p. 112.
- 12 *Commonwealth Labour Report* 1962/63, no. 50, pp. 112-14; R. Markey, *In Case of Oppression. The Life & Times of the Labor Council of NSW*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1994, p. 378; Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, p. 146; *RT*, November 1958: 1.
- 13 Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, p. 147.
- 14 This and subsequent quotation in this paragraph from Kramar, 'The Employment of Women in the New South Wales Public Service', p. 216.
- 15 *ibid.*; *RT*, September 1960: 4; February 1963: 4 (Annual Report of Women's Clerical Sub-Division to 31st December 1962; J. Hutson, *Six Wage Concepts*, Amalgamated Engineering Union, Sydney, 1971, pp. 119-20.
- 16 Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, pp. 148-60; *RT*, July 1969: 4; Hutson, *Six Wage Concepts*, pp. 123-28; ABS *Weekly Earnings of Employees (Distribution)*, Cat no. 6310.0.40.001, August 1995; J. Curtin, *Women and Trade Unions. A Comparative Perspective*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999, p. 51; see Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, pp. 160-175.
- 17 Blackman and Carruthers, *Women's Employment in the NSW Public Service*, pp. 10-11.
- 18 *PSJ*, August 1915: 2-3; January 1916: 15; March 1916: 10; August 1916: 17.
- 19 *PSJ*, June 1915: 3; February 1916: 2; June 1916: 14; J.A. Allen, *Rose Scott. Vision and Revision in Feminism*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994: 235.
- 20 *PSJ*, November 1915: 2.
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 Membership figures are taken from PSA Annual Reports to Conference throughout.
- 23 *PSJ*, January 1920: 21; March 1920: 27; *Constitution and Rules of the PSA of NSW*, Sydney, 1920, 1925.
- 24 *PSJ*, July 1921: 3.
- 25 *PSJ*, September 1921: 4; April 1922: 15, 25; Blackman and Carruthers, *Women's Employment in the NSW Public Service*, p. 3.
- 26 *PSJ*, May 1922: 4; June 1922: 37.
- 27 *RT*, November 1929: 268-71..
- 28 *RT*, February 1930: 31.
- 29 *RT*, April 1930: 83; Jane Timbrell, 'A Brief History of Women's Council', unpublished ms., PSA, Sydney, 1999. I am indebted to Jane Timbrell for documents and information generally for this section on the formation of the Auxiliary. See also 'Women's Council Celebrates 50 Years of Activity', *RT*, May 1979: 5, which dates the formation of the Auxiliary as 1929.
- 30 *RT*, May 1929: Cover iii; April 1930: Cover iii; July 1930: 168.
- 31 *RT*, May 1937: 130; April 1942: 246; *Rules and By-Laws of the Public Service Association of NSW*, Sydney, 1937.
- 32 Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, pp. 120-22.
- 33 *RT*, September 1932: 41-42; November 1933: 242.
- 34 N. Mackenzie, *Women in Australia*, Melbourne, 1962, pp. 225-45; Interview with Jean Arnot, May 1971.
- 35 Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, pp. 122-23; Markey, *In Case of Oppression*, pp. 201-02; E. Grahame, 'Arnot, Jean', in B. Caine, M. Gatens, E. Grahame, J. Larbaestier, S. Watson, E. Webby (eds.) *Australian Feminism. A Companion*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p. 382.
- 36 *RT*, May 1937: 111.
- 37 *RT*, March 1937: 63; May 1937: 134; October 1937: 249; May 1938: 97; April 1939: 104-05; June 1939: 159.
- 38 *RT*, May 1937 134 (President's Report to 1937 Annual Conference); June 1937: 144; August 1937: 201.
- 39 *RT*, February 1938: 27.
- 40 *RT*, May 1938: 97; June 1938: 105; June 1939: 159.
- 41 *RT*, September 1937: 229; February 1938: 21; May 1938: 97; June 1938: 102; April 1939: 108.
- 42 *RT*, November 1940: 512; *Rules and By-Laws of the Public Service Association of NSW*, Sydney, 1942.
- 43 Miss Camamile and Mr C. Wright became its delegates in 1941 *RT*, September 1939: 223; June 1940: 442 (President's Report to 1940 Annual Conference); August 1941: 124; November 1941: 169.
- 44 *RT*, June 1940: 431, 442; July 1940: 451; May 1939: 108; Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, p. 123.
- 45 *RT*, September 1942: 1; May 1944: 594; January 1946: 866.
- 46 *RT*, August 1942: 307.
- 47 *RT*, June 1943: 453.
- 48 *RT*, November 1943: 524.
- 49 *RT*, April 1939: 94; February 1943: 394; April 1943: 425; November 1944: 678; February 1946: 886; March 1948: 11; Blackman and Carruthers, *Women's Employment in the NSW Public Service*, p. 6.
- 50 *RT*, March 1948: 1.
- 51 *RT*, March 1948: 11.
- 52 *RT*, January 1951: 3.
- 53 *RT*, July 1955: 5, 12. Mavis Woodford was Honorary Secretary of the Women's Auxiliary in 1958, and may already have been so at this time.

- 54 *RT*, February 1956: 8.
- 55 *RT*, February 1956: 4.
- 56 *RT*, June 1956: 6; Markey, *In Case of Oppression*, p. 378.
- 57 *RT*, April 1957: 2; March 1957: 6; May 1957: 1; August 1958: 4; November 1958: 6.
- 58 *RT*, November 1958: 6; March 1959: 4; W. Mitchell, *50 Years of Feminist Achievement, A History of the UAW*, Sydney, 1980, p. 56.
- 59 *RT*, March 1959: 4 (Annual Report of Women's Clerical Sub-Division to 31 December 1958); Feb. 1959: 5.
- 60 *RT*, May 1959: 1; June 1959: 1; February 1960: 8; April 1960: 4; June 1960: 2; August 1960: 2; September 1960: 4; February 1961: 4; April 1961: 5, 'Highlights of the President's Report to Annual Conference'; March 1962: 4, 'Highlights of the President's Report to Annual Conference'.
- 61 *RT*, March 1959: 4 (Annual Report of Women's Clerical Sub-Division to 31 December 1958); February 1960: 8 (Annual Report of Women's Clerical Sub-Division to 31 December 1959).
- 62 *RT*, March 1960: 1; February 1963: 4, Annual Report of Women's Clerical Sub-Division for 1962 (Mildred Hoy represented the PSA on this committee); May 1965: 15 (Women's Auxiliary Annual Report for 1964); September 1964: 11.
- 63 E.g., *RT*, May 1959: 1.
- 64 *RT*, April 1960: 4.
- 65 *RT*, May 1959: 5. The male member was Peter Vandyk.
- 66 *RT*, March 1960: 2.
- 67 *RT*, January 1962: 1; March 1962: 5.
- 68 *Rules and By-Laws of the Public Service Association of NSW*, Sydney, 1963.
- 69 Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, p. 148.
- 70 *RT*, April 1960: 4; May 1960: 4; January 1961: 17; July 1961: 5; March 1962: 8.
- 71 *RT*, March 1961: 2, Preview of Conference; November 1961: 3; February 1963: 7; October–November 1965: 12; May 1965: 15.
- 72 *RT*, March 1962: 5; November 1966: 3; June 1967: 4.
- 73 *RT*, April 1964: 4.
- 74 This account is based on interviews with Danny Blackman, Janet Good, Margaret Penson and Reg Wilding, as well as *RT* for this period.
- 75 Government Agencies had been added to the others in the 1930s.
- 76 *Public Service Association of NSW, Rules and By-Laws*, Sydney, 1973, 1990.