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Abstract

I've been asked to take a more contemporary view of women in the labour movement — so I'll take as contemporary the last 25 or so years if, for no other reason, it represents a period of my own substantial involvement. My focus will be the trade union movement because that's where I've worked and that's what I know about.

WOMEN AND LABOUR IN THE UNIONS

Cathy Bloch

I've been asked to take a more contemporary view of women in the labour movement — so I'll take as contemporary the last 25 or so years if, for no other reason, it represents a period of my own substantial involvement. My focus will be the trade union movement because that's where I've worked and that's what I know about.

Briefly about myself. I started teaching in the mid sixties and was first elected as an official of the NSW Teachers Federation in 1969. This period coincided with what some people call the second wave of feminism and it was an exciting period to be politically active as a unionist and as a feminist — and I'll return to that later. Subsequently I was involved either as a rank and file activist on the union's state and national executives or as a union official until 1991 when I became a TUTA educator — which is a position I still hold.

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I came from a union with a pretty good record for the times on women's issues and women's involvement, and I have been fortunate to experience a period of great change for women in the workplace and in the union movement.

The Federation was the first to win equal pay for its members in 1958 — so that when I started teaching I was a fortunate beneficiary. It was also a union with a history of communist influence and leadership, being one of the very few white collar unions affiliated to the ACTU just after the Second World War.

In this brief talk I'm going to touch on four themes — the early growth and influence of white-collar unionism, the impact of second-wave feminism, the consolidation of women's influence, the shift to organising and the challenge for the future.

The Growth and Influence of White-collar Unionism

The large majority of women workers are employed in white collar jobs, and, with some exceptions, women's growing influence in the union movement has come through unions representing white collar workers. However, it wasn't until 1981 that the two major white collar peak organisations ACSPA and CAGEO merged with the ACTU — and women delegates started to become more than exotica at ACTU congresses. I remember the shift that represented not only in terms of gender representation but also in terms of policy.

However at that time, while women were the vast majority of members in the teaching, banking, insurance, nursing and public service unions, their leadership was (and I must say sometimes still remains) predominantly male. Nevertheless, the shift had been made — so that, for example, at the 1979 Congress, after the affiliation of ACSPA, the teachers were the third largest affiliated union.

These unionists brought with them different ideas, experiences and cultures that created the preconditions for women's influence to grow inside the wider union movement. ACSPA had already established a lively and effective Working Women's Centre in Melbourne in 1974 that developed policy organised campaigns, and produced very good material. Part of the deal for the ACSPA unions to affiliate was that the working women's centre would become part of the ACTU — another small but significant victory.

The Impact of Feminism

The existence of the ACSPA Working Women's Centre represented the influence of the post 1969 wave of feminism on women

unionists in white collar unions. By 1975, International Women's Year, some of us had begun organising inside our own unions. In the Federation, for example, in 1975 we elected our first women's coordinator, held our first women's conference and established a women's action program. I believe it was the first in the country — but only the first. Pretty soon most teacher unions had a women's officer of some sort, the Australian Teachers Federation had a women's officer and women were on the move in the unions as an organised group. They were pushing up policies on equal pay, equal opportunity, affirmative action, parental leave, child care, sexual harassment, part-time work and women's involvement in unions.

1975 was a very interesting year. Women were on the move everywhere, and at the 1975 ACTU Congress there was a demonstration of women — outside the Congress — demanding that Congress pursue a wide range of issues for working women. The union movement seemed to be one of the last institutions to respond to women's growing voices.

As one of the few women delegates, it felt to me as if the women were on the outside and the men on the inside. In fact they were — that didn't change till much later. Nevertheless, that year the ACTU agreed in principle to adopt a Working Women's Charter — and two years later it became policy. No doubt, through the influence of women inside and outside the movement, the ACTU pursued and won maternity leave for all workers in 1979.

Women in many unions were also starting to organise themselves into caucuses to become more effective pressure groups with their own unions.

So I see the 1970s as a period of breakthrough and change for women in the union movement, with feminist ideas having considerable influence.

Consolidation

The 1980s and 1990s saw a period of consolidation for women in the union movement. So that, for example, whereas in 1970 women were 24% of union members, but only 3% of ACTU congress delegates, by 1989, their congress representation had grown to 19%.

It took until 1983 to get the first woman, Jennie George elected to the ACTU Executive. 1987 saw the establishment of three Affirmative Action positions on the ACTU Executive and the adoption of a target of 50% representation by 1999. The process is a bit convoluted but necessary, because the normal process

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could not deliver the changes. Women's share of full-time positions in their unions was also growing from around 3% in 1971 to 12% in 1985 and 25% in 1992. Much of this is attributable to the rise in public-sector white-collar unionisation since the 1970s rather than a rise across all unions.

Under the influence of women's activity, issues such as child care, parental leave, and family leave have been given higher priority by the movement.

Women leaders have emerged in a number of unions, for example, CPSU (Wendy Caird). Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union (Anna Booth), NSW Nurses (Sandra Moait), Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union, WA (Helen Creed) and of course the NUW (Fay Campbell). Nevertheless, an entrenched pattern of women's under-representation remains — especially in senior elected positions — power continues to reside mostly in male hands — especially in private sector and in traditional blue-collar employment.

However, the shift is on. I guess Jennie George's election as ACTU President in 1995 represents one high point — and her on going effectiveness as a spokesperson for the movement through some pretty tough times — underlines how important it is for the movement to be and be seen as representing women and women's interests. [Aside: What happens when her term is over? Do we go back to no representation at this level? This is seen as problematic.]

From where I sit now, in TUTA probably the most exciting development has been the growing number of younger women with a feminist outlook coming into the movement.

As you are no doubt aware union membership is in decline — down to about 31%. Interestingly the decline has been more significant among male workers, so that the difference in union density between men and women is shrinking. All the more reason to organise and recruit women workers.

Organising Work — a traineeship for organising recruiters — was established by the ACTU as one initiative to generate change. Among the most impressive have been the young women, many of whom have gone into previously unorganised or under-organised areas and been successful, for example, Naomi Arrowsmith (AWU) in hairdressing; Sarah Kaine (ASU) in charities; Sally McManus (ASU) in infotech; Belinda Kovacevic (Finance Sector Union) in call centres. The focus has been on bottom up rank-and-file organising; these women are committed, tough, hard-working, and not careerists; they are supportive of and encouraging to female members and activists.

However, it will take much more to make the union movement truly representative of women and of women's interests. It will take a shift in the culture of many union — a culture that can be very woman unfriendly.

Recently I have been reading Barbara Pocock's *Strife* and recommend it if you are interested in a contemporary view — it's a good read.

It is hard to exaggerate the negative effects of too much male leadership of unions upon the public perception about unions and their malfunctioning. It makes unions look outdated; it perpetuates the perception that unions are for men not women; it leaves us with leaders who lack an appreciation of the detail of women's lives and our concerns; in fact, it distorts every aspect of unionism from the structure of recruitment initiatives to peak council policy-making.

... [The] presence of more women officials, especially in elected positions, will have positive effects on the representativeness of unions, on the recruitment of women and youth, and on the nature of union policy...

We face enormous challenges — with capitalism rampant, globalisation and conservative governments. I believe that it is only with the full involvement and representation of women that the union movement can meet these challenges.