Women and the Accord

Danny Blackman

Why are women virtually excluded from the Accord? Danny Blackman examines this problem in her investigation of the relationship between the Accord and the position of women in the paid workforce.

The Prices and Incomes Accord between the ALP and the ACTU formed a significant plank in the ALP election campaign in March 1983, offering a compact between labour and the state which sought to guarantee the containment of wage demands, and industrial peace, thus enabling a social democratic government with a high popular profile and a commitment to consensus, to manage the economy out of the current depression.

Implicit in the concept of the Accord from the beginning was an understanding of incomes policy as fundamental to the ability of a Labor government to achieve a return to anything approaching full employment — and thus, from the outset, acceptance of the idea that wages were responsible for the depression.

The agreement, when concluded, prioritised simultaneous reduction of unemployment and inflation. In agreeing to wage restraint, the unions were assured of corresponding restraint on prices and non-wage incomes, some measure of redistribution through reforms to the taxation system, and a gradual increase in the social wage. Sectional claims by stronger sections of the labour movement were exchanged for guaranteed Consumer Price Index (CPI) based rises in a centralised wage fixing system, with a goal of maintenance of real wages and of living standards. In the economic climate of the time, this offered a guarantee of wage rises which might not otherwise be achieved by some sections of the labour movement and, in addition, promised trade union involvement in economic planning by way of the tripartite Economic Policy Advisory Committee (EPAC).

I would argue both that the processes by which this compact between labour and the government was reached, and the policies contained in it effectively exclude women from participation, and therefore that an agreement made on behalf of labour which does not deal with the interests of 37 percent of the existing workforce can hardly be an adequate representation of the interests of that workforce as a whole, or of the Australian working class.

The Nature of the Accord

Firstly, it is important to recognise that the Accord is both an economic and a political document. Its economic intent is obvious in the need for the incoming ALP government to offer a strategy consistent with the social goals to manage the Australian economy out of the worst depression since the thirties; in so doing, it implicitly attempts to manage the crisis within a capitalist framework. Its political intent arises from the conviction born of the experiences of the Whitlam years that, in order to govern successfully, it is necessary for an ALP government to have the confidence of business. The Accord, as a compact between state, labour and capital, is essentially a document aimed at business, at gaining the confidence of the private sector in Australia. This analysis is, I think, substantiated in the spectacle of the Hawke Summit, a sort of media hype to a Tripartite gathering.

It can also be argued that the Accord is, par excellence, a compact with the patriarchy; the working class with which it is concerned is represented as predominantly male. The emphasis which is placed on recovery in the manufacturing industries at the expense of social wage and public sector growth, the low priority placed on redistribution by means of effective price control and reform of the taxation system, together with a commitment to real wage maintenance which fails to address the question of relativities all effectively exclude and disadvantage women.

The Accord’s commitment to regaining full employment is based upon a conception of the proper unemployed as blue collar male (the narrowest possible traditional definition of the working class). Women are very firmly located out of the class for whom this document is drafted, and located back in the home, the family and the “community”. The only specific mention of women in the Accord, for the record, occurs in the section relating to education where, in the context of Equal Opportunity in all areas of education and training, there is an expressed commitment to seeking recommendations from TAFE (Technical and Further Education) on its Equal Employment Opportunity policy and implementation regarding women, rural people and Aborigines.

This active collaboration along patriarchal lines is supported by the growth of a New Right ideology which gives the family a high profile. Threatened by gains made by women in the 1970s, and the effect of these on the nuclear family, the proponents of this ideology seek to emphasise women’s role in the family as primary, and as well as taking up the old argument about married women taking men’s jobs, blame the so-called “crisis in the family” on women’s growing access to paid employment, growing access to divorce, and the general loosening of sexual morality which has occurred in Australia over the last two decades.

Danny Blackman examines this problem in her investigation of the relationship between the Accord and the position of women in the paid workforce.
The Accord emphasises recovery in the predominantly male employing manufacturing industries at the expense of social wage and public sector growth.

The impact of this ideology on the trade union movement, in political terms, can be explored through an analysis of the location of women in the paid workforce — the largest concentration occurring in the clerical area (32.4 percent of employed women in 1980), in the retail industry (18 percent in May 1983), and in the professional/technical area (over 18 percent in 1980). While in the professional/technical area representation of women's industrial interests to the ACTU is often progressive e.g. by such unions as the Australian Teachers Federation, women in the clerical and retail areas are represented by two of the largest and most rightwing unions in Australia — the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees, and the Federated Clerks Union. The political consequences for women of the large representation of these two unions at ACTU level (and even on the ACTU executive) is indicated by the insistence, in FCU policy, on the need for maintenance of the family unit because:

The existence of the family structure provides economic, political, social and psychological advantages for democracy that cannot be adequately fulfilled by any other body .... it is imperative .... that the family unit be a top priority for the government in the areas of taxation schedules and family allowances, and for the union movement and the Arbitration Commission to establish a Needs Minimum Wage sufficient to keep a husband and wife and children in decent circumstances.

Such views are familiar: they represent the thinking behind the 1907 Harvester Decision which, in implementing the concept of the family wage, enshrined in Australian industrial practice the ideology of women's dependency on men and the prior right of males to paid employment.

Given such ACTU representation of the interests of the largest section of women in the Australian workforce, it is not surprising that the ACTU, having endorsed in the Working Women's Charter in 1977, a checklist of basic demands which put the trade union movement on notice that women were able to formulate their own industrial demands, moved, for instance, at the 1983 Congress, towards a position on the provision of child care with regard to the "needs of families to maintain the opportunity for raising children which is independent of institutional care for their children" — a view which, in the event, incorporates the understanding that "child care is primarily a parental issue, not an industrial issue. Whenever possible a child should be cared for by its family". Such a position of necessity concentrates responsibility for child care upon the unpaid labour of women since, because of the gender
wage differential, they will almost invariably be the lower paid partner, and therefore the one to withdraw from the paid workforce. Inevitably, such a situation will keep women out of the paid (full-time) workforce.

It leads also to the increasing development of part-time work as a female ghetto, and to attempts to save jobs in the manufacturing sector by the introduction of "short time" — the three or four day week — on a "married women first" basis.9 Again, condemnation of such practices by the ACTU in the section of the Working Women's Charter on redundancy10 has not prevented its occurrence in practice.

Policies favourable to the interests of women in the paid workforce were acceptable to sections of the trade union movement and the ALP in a period of economic growth and labour market expansion. In a tightening labour market, the trade union movement seeks to defend existing conditions for an internal market; lasting hegemony of the family wage concept reinforces the definition of this market as traditionally male. Women, in turn, are located as a reserve army whose prime commitment is consistently represented as in the home or "community"; whose role is increasingly to perform, unpaid, socially necessary work abandoned with the contraction of the public sector. This process is ensured by the low priority given in the Accord to increases in the social wage (beyond the introduction of Medicare) which: will depend considerably on the government's success in achieving a non-inflationary expansion of the economy, which in turn will be substantially influenced by the extent to which this prices and incomes policy is successfully implemented.11

The Position of Women in the Australian Labour Force

Women's position in the paid labour force is substantially defined by the sexual division of labour, in that responsibility for family, children and home creates the material conditions under which women sell their labour, and also because gender is fundamental to the way in which work is organised.12 Thus, work largely performed by women shows characteristics traditionally associated with "women's work":

often derivative of housework ... associated with food, clothing and cleaning, and ... caring for the young and the sick.13

Gains made by the women's movement in the 1970s created some climate of acceptance for women's participation in the paid workforce in non-traditional areas as well as traditional. However, the onset of the economic crisis in the later '70s served to halt this process in terms of any real gains.

Thus, while overall women's movement struggles for women's control over their own bodies and the process of reproduction facilitated women's participation in the paid labour force (from 39.6 percent in 1970 to 45.1 percent in 1980)14, and introduction of maternity leave provisions ensured their right to retain a place in the labour force, inadequate provision of child care ensured, in the absence of any serious challenge to the existing sexual division of labour, that responsibility for child care still rested on women. Even the Whitlam government's initiative in the direction of paternity leave — a minimal step in involving males in some responsibility for parenting — was abolished by the Fraser government in 1977.

While more women entered the workforce, much of this increase was in the area of part-time work (36.2 percent of all employed women in February 1983)15 and casual or temporary work because of women's (unpaid) responsibility for child care, housework, etc. Over the last decade, capital's restructuring of workforce and work processes around the introduction of new technology has produced a massive increase in part-time work: between 1970 and 1981 the total workforce grew by 19 percent; within this, full-time work increased by only 11 percent, while part-time work exploded with a growth rate of 85 percent16. In August 1983, 845,900 women worked part-time, compared with 240,500 men.17 Hall makes the point that part-time work disguises the extent of unemployment and underemployment,18 and this is clearly reflected in the gender wage differential in Australian society.

Despite legislation for Equal Pay (1969, 1972), in 1981 average weekly earnings for all female employees (part-time and full-time) were 67.6 percent of that of all male employees. This percentage for total female workforce is obviously lowered by the numbers of women working — and earning — part-time, but average weekly earnings of female full-time employees are still only 80.1 percent of those of the corresponding sector of the male workforce, or 89.4 percent if award rates only are compared.19 As women work significantly less overtime than men (2.3 percent of wage as compared with men's 7.8 percent) and receive less in over-award payments (2.4 percent compared with 4.6 percent)20, they are further disadvantaged.

Moreover, because of the extreme gender-based segregation of the Australian workforce, women are concentrated in particular sectors. In May 1983, 81 percent of women were clustered in four major occupational categories. This type of segregation has ensured that, given the narrow interpretation applied to Equal Pay as work of equal value, and the inability to make comparisons of value across traditional lines of job demarcation, Equal Pay legislation has affected comparatively few women workers. Further, women are also segregated in the lower scales of many awards; in the Metal Industry Award, for example, most women are at process worker level. This has obvious effects on women's wages. Some particular industries which employ mostly women, such as the Clothing and Textile industries, have the worst working conditions and lowest wages overall; in the clothing industry, in addition, there are thousands of outworkers who are even more exploited than those who work under factory conditions.

While anti-discrimination legislation makes it possible to effect some changes in the overall conditions and wages of working women, in that it assures the principle of Equal Employment Opportunity in employment and promotion and, in some cases, affirmative action, this is under political attack from conservatives in the trade union movement and is also impacted by developing New Right ideology regarding women's role in the family. Moreover, it does not address basic
questions of the value of work traditionally performed by women, such as typing or cleaning. This particular type of legislation for change without material support can too easily be seen, and used, as management strategies for organising women workers in competition with trade unionism. For women to effectively address their industrial issues they will need to pursue them collectively in the industrial arena and until the full Equal Pay struggle is won in this arena, there will be no material changes in the economic conditions of the majority of women workers.

An Accord in the Interests of Women?

Given their position in the workforce as outlined above, it is reasonable to suppose that women, had they been asked, would have argued for commitments in the Accord for equal pay for work of comparable value, provision of adequate child care, and a high priority for increases in the social wage. These increases should be facilitated by strategies for redistribution of wealth by thoroughgoing taxation reform and effective price control, rather than depending on the ability of capital in the manufacturing sector to produce a significant upturn in the economy. Strategies for public sector development around the social wage would create a practical challenge to the existing sexual division of labour in turning areas of women's unpaid work into paid work, and in addition allow growth in a sector which employs large numbers of women.

The interests of women were ignored in the Accord because of a combination of circumstances arising from the economic crisis including:

- unemployment,
- the collapse of small business in the manufacturing sector due to restructuring of capital,
- the ALP government's need to bind labour into wages restraint (without incurring the rancour that was aroused by the Fraser-imposed Wage Freeze) in order to secure business confidence, and
- the appeal to the trade union movement of guaranteed CPI based increases in a period where rank and file militancy in pursuit of wage claims could not be guaranteed.

Both the tendency of the stronger unions to see expansion of the much depressed manufacturing industry — a substantially male industry — as primary, and a view of women's role in the workforce as a "reserve army" whose proper place was in the home, helped to ensure this.

In accepting, on behalf of the working class, such a compact between labour, capital and the state, the trade union movement has also accepted implicitly the notion of rapid wage rises as the cause of the depression. Its lack of insistence on
The Contents of the Accord

Firstly, it should be noted that one of the basic premises of the Accord is consultation with the labour movement — the tripartite structures of consultation surrounding the Accord have tended to ensure that, for the labour movement as a whole, this has not occurred.

The fundamental features of the Accord are as follows:

to ensure that living standards of wage and salary earners and non-income earning sections of the population requiring protection are maintained and through time increased with movements in national productivity.

and to apply government policy
to prices and all income groups, rather than, as has often been the case, to wages alone.21

These features are in the context of "continuous consultation and cooperation between the parties involved" and with an assurance of "Accommodating and supportive government policy".

The commitment in the "Wages and Working Conditions" section to maintenance of real wages as a key objective will, without any examination of relativities, merely confirm and widen with each successive percentage wage increase the existing gender wage differential. One might well ask "Whose real wages?", for this particular section of the Accord, and the resulting National Wage guidelines can be seen as excluding the issue of equal pay from the agenda altogether. In agreeing to centralised wage fixing with guaranteed CPI based increases, the union movement also accepted the situation of "no extra claims except where special and extraordinary circumstances exist. The no extra claims provision shall apply to both award and overaward payments". 22

In the National Wage Case hearings in 1983, three women's organisations, The National Council of women, Women's Electoral Lobby and the Union of Australian Women, made submissions asking for re-evaluation of women's work on the grounds that the equal pay decision had not achieved the desired results. Such a re-evaluation was ruled to be outside the guidelines; women's wages apparently being neither special nor extraordinary enough, and consideration of the applications was refused.

While a more sympathetic interpretation of the Accord's commitment to improving the living standards of all Australians23 and to "equitable distribution of real disposable income"24 would allow consideration of the equal pay question, it would seem that the most likely strategy to get the question back on the agenda would be to seek to amend the National Wage Guidelines in 1985. It is perhaps reassuring to note the mention of the equal pay question in the Draft Document emanating from the ACTU executive's March meeting25 which offers specific programs around the equal pay issue as indicated by the responses to the Working Women's Centre Draft Manual on the Subject. As the Draft Manual raises the issue of comparable value cases, based on non-sexist definitions of value, and also attacks the system of over-award payments which operate to women's disadvantage, this will involve major campaigns in order to place these areas within the political and economic agenda of the Accord.

While centralised wage fixing guarantees to all women in the workforce, even those in areas with least industrial strength, regular if small increases, the "no extra claims guideline" locks them into this process alone. The system of percentage increases operates to maintain the differential; for most women in the workforce, as for all lower paid groups, a flat rate increase based on the CPI as applied to, say, average male weekly earnings, would be a progressive step, but since the principle of relativities is one of the backbones of the overall wage-fixing system, this would constitute a major battle. Women's wages could be increased to parity with "real wages" by, for instance, a series of lump sum adjustments applied in addition to CPI based increases, whether percentage or flat rate. However, as Justice Staples pointed out in relation to the clothing industry, where the wages of women workers under factory conditions are only 81 percent
The Accord is a compact with the patriarchy which ignores women in the workforce and locates them back in the home.

and increases in indirect taxation. Industry policies which rely on private sector investment promise little in the way of employment opportunities for women, and there is little growth in training opportunities. Inadequate welfare increases mean that women, the majority of welfare beneficiaries, continue to bear the brunt of the Hawke government's economic policies, while the parlous state of existing child care facilities makes the 30 percent real increase in Children's Services funding a minor gain.

There has been no increase in family allowances — rather, the dependent spouse rebate has been extended to de facto couples, thus extending the (male) subsidy for marriage, and increasing women's economic dependence.

For women, once again, the budget has been a con, with money allocated for research but not for solid policy initiatives, and stress by the government on policies like the Affirmative Action Pilot Program which will benefit only a handful of women, while real issues like labour market inequality between men and women are ignored.

Perhaps the most important question in the Accord for women is that of the promised increases in the social wage and the question of redistribution. The most bitter disappointment must surely be the low priority set upon social wage increases. For women, the issue of the social wage is vital and inseparable from the question of their workforce participation. The redefinition of areas of work, performed unpaid by women according to the existing sexual division of labour, as paid work included in the social wage, will both free women from part of their burden of unpaid work, and simultaneously create jobs in a sector that is a substantial employer of women. The provision of adequate services for children and the aged would be key areas for such a redefinition.

Women form the largest single body of welfare consumers — in June 1982 they comprised 61.2 percent of welfare recipients (67.3 percent if unemployment beneficiaries are excluded), and constitute a staggering 95 percent of single parent beneficiaries. As clients of the state, any increase in social wage is to their advantage. As principal users of medical care, they are a major beneficiary of Medicare; as supporting parents who face the greatest problems in gaining housing on the private rental market, and have the least chance of being able to buy their own home, women would benefit greatly from an increase in public housing.

A serious commitment to a social wage strategy involving evaluation of socially necessary work could provide areas of permanent work, many of them deriving from the area of "community work" at present funded either on a short term submission basis through the Department of Youth and Community Services or as job creation schemes through the Community Employment Program. This area is largely run by women, most of its clients are women; it is highly volunteerised, largely non-unionised, and massively overburdened, as are the formal state welfare agencies in dealing with the effects of economic crisis on large sectors of the Australian working class.

The Accord's commitment to tying social wage increases to national economic recovery based on the manufacturing sector performance involves the government in continued concessions to capital (as evidenced in this year's budget, regarded by businessmen as having "only pluses for industry and few minuses" and as establishing "a favourable environment for private capital investment"). This precludes any serious attention to the question of redistribution.

The Accord's commitment to a national superannuation scheme (in line with both ALP and...
Conclusions

Despite the relatively progressive nature of existing ALP and ACTU policy on women, both bodies, faced with the certainty of the election of a Labor government and its need to manage the economy out of a depression, rapidly put aside any commitment to women.

While one recognises the constraints under which the Accord was formulated, the resulting document, which purports to be a compact between the working class, state and capital, is inadequate because it is premised on a very narrow definition of the class. In effect, it is a document of collaboration on a patriarchal basis, by which, for maintenance of the status quo and participation in national economic planning, the trade union movement has assented to a further fragmentation of the Australian working class.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with the notion of a compact between labour and capital in order to deal with economic crisis, such a compact, based on the status quo, can only serve to further exacerbate the differentials between men and women within the class.

Because the Accord is a defensive document based on preservation of the status quo, it represents the interests of the traditional male blue collar working class. The absence of women from the Accord is no accident, but a real exclusion, in that the interests of the working class in such an agreement are seen as the interests of the male working class, "family breadwinners" who also constitute the "proper unemployed", for whom job creation should take place on a longer-term basis than under the Community Employment Scheme. By failing to prioritise extension of the social wage, the Accord effectively seeks to locate women in the "community", in the family, and in doing so is influenced by both the longer-term hegemony of the family wage concept and the impact of New Right ideology in the 1980s.

Nonetheless, the Accord defines the terrain of economic and industrial relations in Australia in the mid-1980s, and as such women will have to struggle collectively to extend its framework to encompass specific goals such as equal pay for work of comparable value, provision of adequate childcare, social wage increases and a long-term campaign for shorter hours with the eventual effect of cutting down the part-time market, while maintaining wages. Women will have to struggle in any renegotiation of the Accord for inclusion of goals such as these, which are of real importance to the position of women in the workforce, and in doing so, will have to attempt to write themselves out of the home and the "community" and back into the Australian working class.

References

4. ibid., p. 7.
5. ibid., p. 6.
18. ibid., p. 21.
22. ibid., p. 9.
23. ibid., p. 3.
24. ibid.
27. Women and the A.L.P., p. 16.
28. ibid.

Danny Blackman is a socialist feminist and trade union activist.