There are thousands of women active in trade unions, yet the image of industrial relations and unionism as a male preserve still lingers. Who decides the issues, strategies and tactics which unions pursue? Do women unionists see things differently? What constitutes a feminist approach to wages?

In this roundtable five women activists spoke with Louise Connor about their approaches to key issues facing unions. The participants are:

- Irene Bolger ............... Victorian Secretary, Royal Australian Nursing Federation
- Joan Corbett ............... Women's Officer, Australian Teachers Federation
- Brenda Forbath ........... Organiser, Hospital Employees’ Federation, (No 1 Branch) Vic
- Anna Kokkinos ............. Solicitor, Slater & Gordon Industrial Unit
- Ann Sherry ................. Occupational Health & Safety Officer, Administrative & Clerical Officers Association, Vic Branch

Louise Connor is an Industrial Officer with the Australian Journalists Association in Victoria and a member of the ALR Collective.

Louise began by asking how the current two tier wages system affects women workers.
Anna Kokkinos: One of the ACTU’s major selling points of the two-tier system is that it is going to benefit low-paid workers, in particular, women. I disagree with this assessment because, essentially, it is a wage restraint strategy that has been introduced by the ACTU and the Labor government to guarantee a certain level of wages outcome which is within the Commonwealth’s budget priorities.

The basic premise of this system is that, in the past, wage increases have been too high. So, in order to recover and rectify, for example, balance of payments problems, wage restraint is necessary. I would argue that wages are not a determinant in that problem.

One of the major reasons we have a balance of payments crisis is that we have a massive investment strike by capital and, instead, money has been used for mergers, takeovers and speculative gains, which have increased the balance of payments problem because they add to the public and private overseas debt.

The union movement has not attacked that basic premise. It has not argued forcefully that wages are not the cause of the problem and that wage restraint is not going to be the answer to getting us out of the economic recession.

Essentially, some really important issues about the way in which women’s work has been undervalued over a long period of time are not going to be considered under these current wage-fixing principles. We’ve been told, for example, that supplementary payments are the answer for women in various industries getting access to over-award payments. This was one of the ACTU’s big selling points of the two-tier system. But, in any event, I do not believe that supplementary payments will be the answer to redressing the historical inequities and discrepancies which exist in respect to women’s pay.

But I certainly welcome a flat increase as opposed to a percentage increase because it is progressive in terms of low-paid workers.

Louise Connor: Instead of arguing that a two-tier system was the only way to guarantee any money wage rises in the face of a government strategy to reduce wages, what could the ACTU have done to redress inequities?

Ann Sherry: The position could have been argued quite differently. The ACTU could have said that workers shouldn’t bear the brunt of the current recession and should be entitiled to reasonable pay for the work they do. It is difficult to accept that workers have to pay more than
any other group for the current economic problems, and women workers even more so because they are clustered in particular groups of industries that are lower-paid than all others.

The national wage decision does not allow, for instance, for comparable worth cases or for arguments to be mounted about the value of work done by those groups of workers. Instead, you have to show that there is an anomaly or special case. The principles in the current guidelines will make even that more difficult than before and, in addition, a ceiling of four percent has been set on pay rises. We have been sold a lemon.

Brenda Forbath: In a sense, the decision simply entrenches historical differences in wage rates. While it might give lower-paid workers more of an increase than they might otherwise get, it doesn't leave any room to question why certain groups of workers get paid so poorly. Unless we are able to work that into our wages strategy, I do not think we will really change anything.

LC: In Victoria last year nurses won major pay rises in a period when workers were being told that restraint was necessary and that there had to be real wage cuts. How was this done?

Irene Bolger: This is not arrogance on our part, but we just sat up and bit them. The Industrial Relations Commission, the government and the ACTU wanted to accuse us of being naive and not knowing the system which, to them, was a real put-down. Of course we knew the system, but we ignored it because it was their rules and their system — and we decided that it was time to chuck their rules out of the door. So our members didn't show lack of care about the system through naivety but because they were fed up.

At our mass meeting in January we had members saying that they shouldn't have to give a no extra claims commitment for two years, and commenting on the two-tier system. A year ago our members would not have known about these issues. They have been educated by the campaign and are starting to be much more aware of what the Accord was, what the current principles are and what a two-tier system means. So, one of the points I wanted to make is that we have to start to educate people at the grass roots about what wages strategies are.

LC: Can we define a feminist wages strategy?

Anna: One of the dangers of the two-tier system is that it focuses totally on wages and nothing else. One of the advantages I saw in the Accord, despite certain criticisms, was that we could talk about things other than wages, such as the social wage. Conveniently, that has been dropped in determining incomes policy.

We should not allow ourselves to be locked into a traditional view of wages but, rather, look at the whole issue of the distribution of income and how that works in the public and private sectors in relation to the amount of expendable income people have and living standards generally. Living standards are judged not just by the amount of wages people receive.

Ann: An issue I would like to see incorporated into a feminist wages strategy is the control of prices, because it is absurd to talk about a wages strategy without talking about some sort of price control. We are constantly chasing our tails, despite having an alleged Prices and Incomes Accord in place for a number of years.

Joan Corbett: Certainly, the provision of child care, education and education-related services relates directly to wages. They determine who is able to work and in which occupations.

“under the Accord we could talk about things other than wages, such as the social wage. Conveniently, this has now been dropped”

We also have to focus on some of the mechanisms which have been relatively successful for women in other government programs. Family allowances, for example, are a really useful form of income which have a very direct bearing on women's welfare and living standards, even though they have never been indexed for price movements.

Irene: There are practical things that can be done about a couple of the issues which have been mentioned — prices and child care.

Women could get their act together right across Australia and really keep an eye on prices and do something physical about rises, like organising boycotts of goods.

I also think we should mount a national campaign about child care. I have been through this problem when my child was young and while I now don't have to worry about child care, I can assure you it is still in the forefront of my mind because it was so difficult to cope with having a child and working.

I think we do really take such a soft line about child care. We back off so quickly and let ourselves get tied into having to get government grants and having to justify the existence of child care centres. By the time you get all your submissions together and send them in to get a grant, everybody is sick to death and too tired so it just falls into a big heap.

We must start looking at strategies for addressing some of these issues that are sidelines to the wages issue, but mean real gains for women.

Brenda: Working within the union movement structures to try to get these initiatives is absolutely vital. But the crucial issue is, in fact, to change the grass roots. While traditional union structures are important, we also have to go outside them because, in fact, one of the major problems has always been the distinction between waged
and non-waged people — and this is a critical issue for women.

Traditionally, the union movement has never come to grips with the fact that there is a whole range of people who are not seen as part of their constituency. Certainly, one of the strategies we must adopt is to make unions raise, on a day-to-day basis, the practical issues which people feel they can be involved in.

**LC:** Is there a place for flat rate wage increases in a feminist wages strategy?

**Joan:** My own feeling is that there is a place at the moment for flat rate increases. I can see some merit in this measure in a situation where none of the best possible options is happening. It is a mechanism that at least ensures some kind of fundamental improvement in living standards for the people most in need. But the extent to which it makes sense as an ongoing strategy is very difficult to judge.

**Ann:** In public sector unions there has been a debate over a long time on this question because the ACOA, for example, covers people who earn from $13,000 to $60,000 per year. The bulk of the members earn below $25,000 per year.

There has been support for flat dollar increases because the disparity between the people at the bottom and the top has just blown out of all proportion. But the support for a flat rate is stimulated by the absence of a coherent broad wages strategy. It is a way of keeping some people off the poverty line.

But this debate has also focussed on social wage issues and I do not think that the notion of flat rate increases should really be countenanced without talking about all the other things outside money that affect people’s living standards.

**LC:** Is there a role for centralised wage fixing in a feminist wages strategy?

**Joan:** From a public sector unionist’s position, the reality is that the alternatives to centralised wage fixing for the public sector are pretty hopeless. Public sector workers haven’t done well in any of the systems that depend on free bargaining. We have a vested interest in a centralised wage fixing mechanism surviving in some way especially since an alternative strategy has not appeared.

Collective (industry by industry) bargaining processes can have the effect of exaggerating wage relativities for industrially strong or strategic unions compared with unions that are difficult to organise or less politically or economically influential. But I get very pissed off with the argument that, to protect women workers, we have to wear whatever the ACTU determines.

**Ann:** Do we have to have a centralised wage fixing system that is as narrow as the one we have at the moment? One of the problems with centralised wage fixing is that it has very narrow terms of reference.

On the one hand, there are arguments for maintaining a form of centralised wage fixing that reflects early twentieth century arbitration decisions; that...
The ACTU has not come to terms with the fact that its constituency is changing and that it is time to start reflecting that.

**Anna:** What really determines the role of centralised wage fixing is the relative strengths of capital and labour at any given time. When the union movement is disunited or weak, the wages outcomes it can achieve, and its impact on other issues is generally a lot less than what can be gained from a position of strength. Where unions are organised and are on the political and industrial offensive, the Arbitration Commission responds. So it comes back to organising, because the commission will never, of its own volition, come up with anything decent unless it is under pressure from the union movement.

**Ann:** If the alternative to centralised wage fixing is free bargaining, or industry by industry bargaining, then some way of uniformly achieving wage rises across industries is important. So I must admit that there is a role for a centralised wage fixing process, though not necessarily as it exists at the moment. Otherwise, we could see workers in strong industries who are well organised, and with unions which are prepared to bite the bullet and represent their members' interests, getting much greater gains than workers in other industries where, for a whole range of reasons, they would not be prepared to take industrial action.

The reality for many women workers is that they are confined to industries where labour is poorly organised or represented by unions that are industrially weak or lack the will to pursue wages gains for their members.

**Joan:** Of course, there is a counter-argument and that is, given what has happened to women's wages over this last period, it wouldn't take them too terribly long, in the absence of centralised wage fixing, to really get up and fight. The evidence of the Victorian nurses' dispute is interesting because it broke all the rules. But they were under enormous pressure for a long time and do you wish that amount of hardship on any group of women workers?

**Ann:** The nurses also had a leadership with the political will to do it, as well as tremendous public support.

“while traditional union structures are important, we also have to go outside them”

**Brenda:** There had been a big campaign built up within the nursing profession over years about what they were going for in terms of wage justice. At the same time, it is a highly unionised field with large workplaces, which makes it easier to organise.

**Ann:** But there are many other groups of women workers who are represented by unions without the political will to make real gains for their members. Any feminist wages strategy must look at the unions that represent women and whether they are a stumbling block to wage justice for those workers.

**LC:** Ann, you mentioned earlier the increasing participation of women in unions and the movement's inability to reflect this. How can we focus on this?

**Ann:** The way to bring it home is to organise activity by women workers that cuts across union barriers. The comparable worth campaign had the potential to do this. But the ACTU made little effort to organise information out to its affiliates on the details of the case, and its implications for women workers. The comparable worth case, as with previous equal pay cases of the early seventies, had potentially huge support across a whole range of unions from very diverse groups of women workers who rarely come together.

**Brenda:** There also needs to be an awful lot of work done within individual unions. My union, the Hospital Employees Federation (Number 1 branch) covers the child care industry — which is under-unionised and difficult to organise. Only recently has the union had someone working full time for day and residential child care workers.

Unions must sink resources into unorganised industries and wait a while to get the returns — to put it in capitalist terms. They must get organisers out talking to potential members, preparing material for them and showing that the union can assist them. That's when people start to join unions.

Sometimes, these decisions are hard to make because of financial problems.

**Ann:** More often, it is a matter of priorities, not just of finances, because they are channelled into fairly traditional areas that the union has considered important for a long time.

**Brenda:** Yes, a union has to make the decision to take funds away from those areas where they are normally spent, where the traditional membership lies, and put them into these new untapped areas. These areas are often very small workplaces with one, two or three people working in them and, in the case of child care, with employers far removed from the place of work — which means time and effort in reaching them. It is a mighty job.

When you are confronted by the way some of those industries are organised, it makes you see the necessity of being involved at a broader policy level. It becomes a question of unions being prepared to broaden out from their traditional concerns of sorting out problems, running disputes and going for wage increases.

It involves unions in trying to influence government policy and being prepared to mount publicity campaigns around that. For a lot of unions, these are new pursuits and they don't have research or publicity officers, or people with the time, resources and skills to get involved.

**LC:** Several of you have spoken about the problems with the way work is organised and the historical differences in wages for women's occupations compared to male-dominated jobs. This issue is large enough to be the subject of a separate round-table but, briefly, how does it fit into a feminist wages strategy?
Ann: Fundamental issues about the organisation of work and the design of jobs need to be taken up in an overall wages strategy because, increasingly, women and low-paid workers are getting locked into jobs that have no future. In a way, it is the counter to equal employment opportunity programs. You introduce fine programs to give women and other disadvantaged groups in the workforce access to equal opportunity at work, but design jobs in such a way that these groups are locked into work areas that are unsatisfying and provide no career structure.

LC: The Victorian nurses' dispute last year was about the restructuring of the nursing profession as much as it was about pay rises. The ultimate result was a recognition of the high level of skills involved in nursing and therefore the necessity of professional rates of pay. Perhaps other occupations that are performed predominantly by women could benefit from this.

Irene: But there are problems with our move to a so-called professional rate. The argument that is put forward now is that higher education is going to bring our wages up. What that does is discriminate against the working class, so it is not just a feminist issue, but also a social issue, and something we are really going to have to battle out in the next year or two.

The government's intention is quite obvious. They would like to use the shift to higher education to make nursing more elite, reduce the number of nurses and bring in a new level of lower-paid workers. That might mean more State Enrolled Nurses (SEs), but it might also be another level of hospital workers.

The dilemma we have at the moment is that we, of course, support upgrading SEs, but we are worried that there is going to be a transfer of our exploitation to that group of workers. That started during our dispute and we are going to have to make sure that can't happen. We are already saying that our members are still going to be bedside workers. We are not going to allow the form of elitism which says that now there is high technology and higher education, then nurses should be administrators. We want to avoid a situation where nurses will be in charge and be paid at a higher rate, but their numbers will be halved and other workers will come into do the bedside nursing and be paid lower wages.

That is not what it's all about because the work that nurses are doing now is worth more. It is highly developed in some areas and pretty basic in others. But you have to look at the basic philosophy of what we value in work.

Ann: That really illustrates one of the problems that is going to come up again and again as groups of women workers fight to get out of the low-paid morass. It will be argued that they can get out of it on the basis that they now have skills like men, and not that the kind of work that has traditionally been women's work is to be valued in itself.

For example, much of the recent argument on clothing trades wages rests on establishing that women had machine skills like men in some industries, not that the work they have been doing for years is very skilled and therefore should be paid much better.

Joan: And with back pay to 1910!