



## PROFILE

### Jennie George

Jennie George is used to making symbolic breakthroughs for women in the labour movement. In 1979 she became the first woman to hold the senior elected position in Australia's biggest teachers' union, the NSW Teachers Federation. Four years later she won a public-sector unions' position on the ACTU executive, becoming the first woman ever to sit on that body.

Now Ms George is set to become the first female full-time elected officer at the ACTU secretariat. She is certain to gain endorsement from the Left unions to stand as their candidate for an ACTU assistant secretaryship available to the Left when Laurie Carmichael retires at the ACTU Congress in September this year.

But while acknowledging the symbolic significance of such milestones in the still male-dominated union movement, she insists that symbolism is not enough. Neither is the idealism of sections of the women's movement.

Instead, it is the concrete, practical achievements that improve women's working lives which really matter: using the industrial relations system to push for increased pay and training opportunities for sections of the workforce dominated by women, gaining additional government funding for childcare and pushing employers for workplace-based childcare, using the Accord bargaining process to secure increases in social welfare from the federal government and running test cases in the industrial tribunals to estab-

lish award entitlements to parental leave.

Tension between feminists working within the industrial relations system and the sections of the women's movement who are highly critical of institutions like the ACTU is best illustrated by the debate over equal pay. Despite the Arbitration Commission's test case decisions in 1969 and 1972, equal pay has not been achieved in practice because women are concentrated in relatively low-paid sections of the workforce: service industries such as cleaning or childcare, semi-skilled production work in factories, occupations like nursing. In turn, the reason many of these areas are low-paid is be-



cause the Australian industrial relations system has traditionally used the male-dominated blue-collar trade and craft skills as yardsticks for assessing the "work value" of different kinds of skills. In the United States this problem led to the emergence of "comparable worth", a technique designed to evaluate the worth of different jobs by a comparison of the tasks comprising them. Many within the Australian women's movement advocate the comparable worth approach. In 1985 the commission specifically rejected an ACTU test case seeking endorsement of the comparable worth concept and reasserting the traditional "work value" concept. Since then women in the labour movement like Jennie George have instead concentrated on using the minimum rates adjustment process under award restructuring and the new emphasis in industrial relations on encouraging and recognising skills formation to gradually realign pay rates between female- and male-dominated occupations and industries.

"The trouble with the debate about equal pay and the comparable worth

arguments," says George, "is they are fine debates to have but what we have got to do is find the mechanisms of actually doing things to redress the situation. I don't disagree with the principle of comparable worth but...it is clear that in the Australian context the pursuit of comparable worth is not going to be accommodated."

George traces her political commitment to the labour movement, her feminist principles and her views of the importance of education to her childhood experiences. Her Russian parents, displaced during World War Two and unwilling to return to the Soviet Union under Stalin, arrived in Australia in 1950. In straitened circumstances during their early years in this country, her parents separated. On a kitchen hand's wages, her mother had responsibility for a growing daughter and an aged mother. "I grew up in a female household with my mother and grandmother, and I learnt an empathy for people who don't have it so easy. My mother had a strong belief in the value of education as a means of getting out of that predicament. She had studied geology at the University of Rostov but the war had put an end to that. It angered me that here was this intelligent person who had never had the opportunities to make it."

George decided to train as a teacher because the scholarship included a more generous living allowance than Commonwealth scholarships. At university during the late 1960s she was active in the Trainee Teachers Club [a branch of the NSW Teachers Federation] and joined the anti-Vietnam War movement and the Eureka Youth League—the latter organisation linked to the Communist Party. She met and later married Paddy George, a CPA member who strongly influenced her political views but who died tragically of cancer in 1980. Ms George has never been a member of a political party, although she did think about joining the ALP when she moved to Melbourne in 1989 to take up her current position as assistant national director of the Trade Union Training Authority. "All my political interests are focused on the union movement. Frankly the prospect of going along to meetings and engaging in factional struggles, usually over who is going to be pre-selected for a seat, doesn't capture my imagination."

MARK DAVIS is an industrial reporter on the *Financial Review*.