

# Awarding Women

*The August wages decision proved a fillip for the opponents of award restructuring in the union movement. It also deepened women's suspicions. Sue McCreadie argues, however, that it's no excuse for failing to face up to one of the biggest challenges for women workers in decades.*

**A**ward restructuring has been hailed as the most significant development in the wage-fixing system since the Harvester judgment of 1907. But can it deliver the goods for women? Or will it, as some critics have argued, reinforce their inferior position in the labour market and the workplace for years to come?

For many feminist critics, award restructuring, like the industry restructuring which spawned it, is a boy's game, tailor-made for the metal industry and imposed on the rest of us. Male-dominated manufacturing unions, it is argued, have hijacked the agenda. Echoing general anti-restructuring critiques, feminist critics query the current preoccupation with the tradeable goods sector and consequent neglect of the economic contribution made by more feminised areas such as the services, community and public sectors.

Feminists have also questioned the relevance of the metal industry model for women's industries, and have been sceptical about redressing structural inequalities in a period of wage restraint. Is this pessimism justified?

From the ACTU's point of view, a key selling point of the restructuring

process had been the expected benefits for low paid workers. On that score, the decision handed down by the Industrial Relations Commission on August 7 was deeply disappointing.

The ACTU claim for general increases of \$20-\$30 per week in two instalments during 1989/90 was accepted by the Commission. But there are some fears of a rerun of the fate of the second tier in 1988 when women workers in industrially weak unions, notably in sales and clerical, faced long delays in receiving wage increases. The ACTU also argued for a substantial lift in the minimum rates through supplementary payments - a step which would assist those workers (disproportionately women) who lack access to over-award payments.

At the trades level, the ACTU claim for a minimum rate of \$407 (\$356.30 base rate and \$50.70 supplementary payment) was accepted by the commission. In this area, however, the labour market is tight and actual rates exceed the award. Key employer groups, the CAI and MTIA, strongly opposed supplementary payments for process workers on the grounds that most were only on the minimum rate and, thus, that significant costs would have been incurred.

The Commission refused to endorse the ACTU's proposed set of relativities and set out its own recommended relativities. These leave process workers (and hence many women workers) short-changed, and make a mockery of strong unions' restraining claims in support of the low paid. The decision, which was incomprehensible in parts, also seems to reject reclassification as part of transition to new awards. At the time of writing it is still unclear whether the relativities are intended to be prescriptive or indicative and how much room there is for unions to manoeuvre.

If we are stuck with the Commission's relativities, there is no doubt that many low paid workers whose expectations have been raised will feel cheated and the critics of award restructuring will feel vindicated. But, despite this partial setback, award restructuring opens up opportunities which shouldn't be missed. If women are to make real gains we need to look beyond the pay increases of the next twelve months and focus on the broader agenda of improving job satisfaction and career paths and taking more power in the workplace.

What strategies are available for women? In the past, two main avenues have been pursued: re-evaluating and improving women's jobs and getting

women into non-traditional (i.e. 'men's') jobs. In re-evaluating the work women do, much depends on the framework of the restructured award now being negotiated, and the process for the transition to a new award. Where women's jobs are undervalued, the new awards will need to do more than introduce broadbanding and multiskilling.

In manufacturing, the litmus test will be the textile, clothing and footwear industries where women comprise 60 percent of the workforce - and especially the clothing sector where they comprise 95 percent.

The essence of the TCF unions' proposals is the recognition that the machinist classification needs to be 'unpacked' and dispersed across several skill levels, up to and including trades level.

At present there are a large number of machinist classifications but these are separated by no more than a few dollars. The only scope for improving earnings is the piece rate bonus system which remunerates only for speed.

Under the restructured award a range of skill factors will be recognised and remunerated: variety and complexity of tasks, level of autonomy, ability to work in a team, responsibility for quality con-

trol, and machine servicing and maintenance. This means that a machinist has the potential to reach the new trades level and up her current rate by up to 35 percent.

Some workers already exercise these skills without recognition (for instance, many fix their machines on the quiet rather than lose their bonus while waiting for the mechanic to turn up). In many places new forms of work organisation (such as Just In Time or Total Quality Control) demand the exercise of team skills and a greater level of judgment and decision-making for the operator.

A broadly similar strategy is being pursued in the metal unions' proposals which create four levels for process workers. The principle is similar in white collar areas. The Commercial Clerks' Award (Vic) has only three classifications and does not reflect the whole range of clerical work which is done. The Federated Clerks Union in that state plans to insert up to seven extra classifications to take account of these functions.

But how likely is it that significant numbers of women workers will find themselves reclassified upwards in the transition to the new award? A key fac-

tor will be the level of resources unions are prepared to devote to this exercise.

In manufacturing, the slotting in of workers to the new structures is to be done by a combination of skills audits and competency testing. For Australian unions this is uncharted territory. Not surprisingly, there is an army of consultants (mainly men) eager to jump on the restructuring bandwagon and offer their expertise. But if the process is to benefit women it will need to be done in a way which is sensitive to the historical gender bias. This means accepting the possibility that existing skill relativities could be turned inside out, with some operators' positions being equated in status with the trades person. Unfortunately, trade elitism is still alive and well among many male officials and workers.

One way to counter this is to ensure that women on the shop floor are involved in these exercises and that it is not all left to officials and outside 'experts'. In the past one of the main factors behind undervaluations of women's work has been a lack of formal training and credentialling in many female occupations. Women's skills are often acquired informally and are thus seen as 'natural'.



Photo: Dale Mann/Retrospect

Award restructuring offers the chance to recognise and accredit these informally acquired skills for the first time, and to introduce formal training systems for women's occupations.

One problem is that introducing credentials for everyone might just lead to 'credentials inflation', leaving existing relativities unchanged. And due to a variety of factors - interruptions to employment, child care problems, timing of courses, and good old-fashioned prejudice - many women could find themselves excluded from training opportunities and quality jobs. Part-time workers (78 percent of whom are women) are also likely to miss out.

National training frameworks (which

reasons. The "structural efficiency principle" set out back in August 1988 called on industry to address any cases where award provisions discriminate against sections of the workforce. Action in this area needs to go beyond tokenistic, though long overdue, reform of sexist language. There's not much advantage in having a 'tradesperson's' classification if they are still all men.

Award restructuring, of course, is about more than changing the text of awards. The new awards, in being less prescriptive, create a framework for reforming work organisation and industrial relations in the workplace.

Sex stereotyping of jobs has gone hand-in-hand with Taylorism: women

second tier will be further entrenched. Due to inferior industrial muscle, women will find it harder to extract the benefits of restructuring and may even be forced to trade off real conditions.

Such fears will be fuelled by the Commission's inclusion of most of the employers' shopping list as a legitimate part of the negotiating agenda.

Further casualisation of the workforce is inconsistent with the goal of higher value-added products and services. Moreover, the likely result will be an accentuation of the division between workers in the core (permanent, skilled, and with career paths) and periphery (casual, unskilled and insecure), with women as the main losers. The union response has to be to demand a tightening of restrictions and regulation of casuals and outworkers, and to target these workers for training.

When employers talk of 'flexible working hours', their concern is not, of course, for workers with family responsibilities, but 'seasonal demand' on the one hand, and for technology which needs to run for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, on the other. The challenge for unions is to turn the debate around and demand that the needs of women and children are given priority over the needs of markets and machines.

There are risks in restructuring. But the risks of doing nothing are greater. In the current political environment, improvements in our balance of payments and the tradeable goods sector are a precondition for redressing structural inequalities and providing better wages and welfare.

At the same time, the consultative mechanisms being established to oversee restructuring provide an opening for a significant shift in the balance of power in the workplace, from management to workers and from men to women. The involvement of women workers and shop stewards in these processes is crucial.

Above all, we need to take the debate about the sex stereotyping of jobs and undervaluing of women's work to the shop floor, raising the awareness of men and the expectations of women.

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### The August Wages Decision

	ACTU Claim		Commission Decision	
		MRT		MRT
Building Tradesperson	100%	\$407.00	100%	\$407.00
Metal Tradesperson	100%	\$407.00	100%	\$407.00
Metal Worker, Grade 4	96%	\$390.70	90-93%	\$366.30-378.50
Metal Worker, Grade 3	90%	\$366.30	84-88%	\$341.90-358.20
Metal Worker, Grade 2	85%	\$346.00	78-82%	\$317.50-333.90
Metal Worker, Grade 1 (Trainee)	80%	\$325.60	72-76%	\$293.00-309.30
Storeperson/packer	91%	\$372.00	88-92%	\$358.20-374.40

MRT = Miminum Rate Target, which includes the Restructure Increase (\$20-30) and Supplementary Payments, to be phased in over 18 months.

are being negotiated as the linchpins of new awards) will need to ensure the right to training for all workers (including part-timers and casuals). The Affirmative Action Act, which now covers all private sector employers with more than a hundred employees, could be used to set targets for women's participation in training and to monitor movements in women's distribution across skill levels.

In manufacturing, training needs to include operators, who are currently expected to learn "sitting by Nellie", and to include generic skills which are portable from firm to firm. And without English on the job and basic literacy the earnings gap could get worse for migrant women and early school leavers.

One criticism of the closer nexus between employment and training which is currently being pushed is that unemployed women may find entry to training for non-traditional jobs even harder. Many trades jobs are still inaccessible to women for a variety of

are overwhelmingly operators, while men tend to do the installation, programming and servicing. Job redesign may be used to remarry these 'male' and 'female' tasks, for example, by allowing operators to do more routine maintenance and rewarding them for the use of problem-solving and diagnostic skills. The potential also exists for giving workers more autonomy and job satisfaction through devolving supervisory functions and introducing more team work.

That, then, is the union agenda.

The employers, from the start, have had a somewhat different agenda. Top of the shopping list are: increased scope for enterprise awards, greater casualisation of labour, and demands for 'flexible working patterns'.

While the Commission has endorsed the ACTU's argument for a co-ordinated reshaping of the award system and rejected the employers' more decentralised company-by-company approach, fears persist that the enterprise bargaining begun under the