The Metal Ceiling

Lily d'Ambrosio is the new women's officer at the Victorian Trades Hall Council. She replaced Tricia Caswell, who went on to become director of the Australian Conservation Foundation. She was interviewed for ALR by Penelope Cottier.

Should I call you Lily or Liliana?
If you say "Liliana" get the pronunciation right.

Well, Lily, you have only been in the position of Women's Officer for a few weeks. Is funding for the position guaranteed?

No. We had agreed funding from the former state government for nine months, but the coalition made it clear that funding will be cut off from union projects first of all, so we are looking at alternative sources. A lot of my time has been taken up chasing funds.

So has this position always relied on government support rather than direct support from the union movement?

That's largely been the case. If our current efforts to raise private or community funding aren't successful, we will have to approach affiliated unions to protect the position through committed funding. This process has already started.

Funding for a position like this really goes to the heart of how much the union movement is involved, not simply in economic issues but also in 'proactive' work to raise issues that sometimes aren't seen as essential to unionism. Child care is the classic example. Do you think that the union hierarchy still sees child care as a marginal issue?

I tend to be a little sceptical about these things. Over the last few years people have learned to say the right things, and to give tacit or nodding support to what are perceived to be the right issues. The real test will come when positions such as mine are supported by those who have been making these noises. Child care is one of the areas where change is necessary, the issues of paid maternity leave, the move towards part-time employment which more and more women are pushed into, the vulnerable employment status of many women and women's particular superannuation needs are the ones which the union movement will need to tackle. A coordinating position such as Women's Officer provides a litmus test of whether the unions are prepared to go beyond token gestures.

In the corporate sector, reference is sometimes made to a 'glass ceiling' beyond which women cannot rise. Is there a metal ceiling in the union movement against which women hit their heads?

Whether or not there's a metal ceiling, there have been recent changes to the structures of Trades Hall, including rule changes to require a certain proportion of female representation at the executive level of Trades Hall. There is now also an Affirmative Action Vice-President; that is, one of the Vice-Presidents must be a woman. So there is steady progress on these structural reforms.

One of the most vivid memories I have of my experience as a full-time worker in unions is of the language of debate, the heated, argumentative, and often loud discussion which I, as a far from demure female, found somewhat intimidating, or at least ugly. Do you think that there is something about unionism at an even deeper level than the elected structural adjustments you have identified which alienates women from this form of decision making?

It really comes down, not to the word structure, but to a whole culture. We can use up a lot of energy changing structures, and this is important in itself, but the cultural problem is more profound for women and will determine whether or not unions survive. Women have entered into unions at the organising level and higher, but there are still many alienating factors. For example, when I worked at the Federated Furnishing Trades Society, I was the first female organiser there, although the union had a reasonably large female membership. A few weeks into my work it was made clear to me by means of a wink and a nudge from a fellow organiser that it would be advisable for me to attend the pub where a lot of unofficial business was transacted. It was not so much a social gathering for its own sake, but one where the boys would confer and exchange information about the day's or week's events. It seemed to be a necessary part of the job. I found this extremely difficult.

Let's get back to the evolution of unions. Jeff Kennett—a man who does things to the English language which should be illegal between consenting adults—has said that unions, like dinosaurs, are "very extinct". To pick up on the metaphor, or oxymoron, is it true that if unions are forced into or take up a battle position to protect the existence of unions, as such, then women's interests will be pushed right back and women unionists will possibly become even more extinct than men?

Unions will survive, despite Kennett. However, the ones who will really suffer will not be the workers in really strong unions, but the workers who aren't unionised. That is, the women—particularly those in part-time, small enterprise positions. They have no way to negotiate themselves out of bad contract proposals put to them by management. If nothing else,
Kennett's proposals will mean that union organisers will have to spend most of their time with their members on sites, negotiating over contract proposals.

If unions do not expand to include those who are not protected, don't they stop being a progressive force? If unions are only guarding themselves and ignoring those who are perceived of as weak, aren't they replicating the very process Kennett will undertake?

It will be a problem if those unions with massive resources can attract and keep membership at the expense of other workers. The union movement will have to understand that it must take a far greater role in the community than it has to date if it wants to survive. Some of this will be through the pure economics of job security and so on. The nature of employment is changing, and so the relationship between unions and workers must also change. Communities are different, the networks we could rely on say, 30 or 40 years ago, no longer exist.

Would you agree that unions need to get away from the tendency to categorise all employers, particularly small business, as 'the enemy'? Many people in this area of work might be quite sympathetic to some things unions do or should represent but in different ways.

That's right. If a lot of our members had the choice between being a wage earner or running their own business, most would probably prefer to run their own business. It's an issue of control, and we have to accept that what members want is the power to control their lives. This is not a dirty concept, but one we have to be mindful of, and be seen to come to terms with.

Perhaps this involves looking seriously at other examples for different modes of working.

One model we can look at is the AFL. They set an objective, the national game, and asked themselves how they were going to achieve it. They implemented a policy which got rid of some cultural characteristics of the game and the way it's run. Basically these changes will see them into the future, although being a Victorian and fairly parochial in my appreciation of football I don't like to see some working-class teams disappearing. But, in effect, what they are doing is reconstructing the culture of football, and creating something new.

Some would say that over the last three or so years, the union movement has decided on a similarly decisive course. References to 20 big unions and to enterprise bargaining are often made in the context of achieving greater membership. But personally I can't see how unions going around picking off other unions' members will achieve a greater membership overall. Nor is it clear what this actually does for the membership. I am not convinced that bigger is necessarily better. Nor can I see how enterprise bargaining, which is the latest thrust from the ACTU, will do anything positive for many women scattered among smaller workplaces, often ununorganised, often unskilled in English.

How is enterprise bargaining going to achieve equitable outcomes for these women? The way things will be structured, there'll be no obligation on an employer to negotiate. When I was an organiser with the Federated Clerks Union a dispute arose at Yakkas. The clerks, who were mostly women, had negotiated a deal with management which pre-empted what the National Wage Case was widely believed to be about to decide. The Wage Case was somewhat less favourable than expected, and management tried to renege on the agreement. Industrial action was taken and the matter referred to the IRC, but we got nowhere. It's not enough for people to band together and assert power, it's a question of control.

I have metaphors of fabric running through my head, due to you mentioning the furnishing trade, so let's talk about the Great Flag Debate. Some people on the Left see these issues of national identity as fairly trivial, but symbols are vitally important. Do you think that unions should get involved in this kind of debate?

This comes back to the point about the role unions play in society, which I believe should broaden. The days have to go when unions are relevant to members until they clock off for the day. We have to look at society as a whole and bear in mind the history behind that culture, including the displacement of Aboriginal culture. So, yes, we should be involved in that sort of debate.

Should that include members using union resources, such as journals, to express their views on these issues?

Yes, a lot of members don't have other avenues of public expression open to them. Access to expression is one thing unions can be involved in providing. At one stage a proper newspaper was going to be started by the ACTU but I think that got pushed off the agenda in favour of more important things.

We talked briefly about unions doing more to ensure women take up positions of power within their structures, if not changing their cultures to accommodate women. Do unions also need affirmative action plans for women and men of non-anglo backgrounds, so that real communication with workers from various ethnic backgrounds can occur?

Unions historically must take some of the blame for responsibility for not doing enough in this area. But there has been a definite improvement in this area over the last few years. Not to the level I would regard as satisfactory and once again the possibility of tokenism arises. But affirmative action would be a positive step.

But given that unions have historically ignored women and non-anglo women in particular couldn't it be argued that it is not so important to be representative of the members as of the non-members?

Electoral processes in unions do need to be reassessed as part of the process of redefining what unions are about. Many people would see a danger in this sort of questioning, but I see it as a very healthy thing. We can't assume that the realities of today are those of yesterday. The unions' 'electorate', if you want to put it that way, has never been and never will be a homogenous group. Tradition of itself is not enough to take us into the future, and there are different traditions within unionism anyway. Part of an institution's ability to stay alive is to be open to the different traditions which make it up.

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