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NEW CONDITIONS
NEW DEMANDS

Some of the material in this article was presented to the Sydney Workers' Control Conference but here the author, who has worked in industry and is currently an office worker, specifies the changing position of women as a permanent section of the work force and poses some questions for trade unions and others of the left.

THERE WAS A TIME, not so long ago, when most communists and socialists believed that a high rate of employment of women could only happen under a socialist system, and that equality had been achieved through equal pay, guaranteed employment for those who want to work, opportunities to learn a trade or higher education, and through the provision of pre-school and after-school child care, paid maternity leave and a certain level of community services.

Now, however, the position has changed in many capitalist countries where there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women workers and particularly in the number of married women workers. This change in the work force applies particularly to Australia.

Women now represent more than one-third of the total work force. In May 1966, according to the Commonwealth Census, almost 40% of all women 15 years and over were working. If allowance is made for full time students, more than 50% of Australian women aged 15-59 years are working or training for work. Of this work force, nearly a half (48%) are married. This is the most dramatic change. The Melbourne Institute of Public Affairs states that in the twenty years 1947-1967, the number of married women working has risen from 100,000 to over 700,000.

Postwar industrialisation and the development of highly mechanised and automatic production processes has greatly expanded the range of jobs for women, particularly in the manufacturing sections of industry. At the same time technological change demands that young people, formerly the ready supply of unskilled and semi-skilled low paid workers, stay longer at school. To fulfil labor requirements industry has promoted a migration program, but as this has probably reached a peak, the only possible avenue left is to encourage increasing sections of married women to join the work force.
What is the significance of all this for the forces seeking radical change and socialism? Does this influx of women into the work force weaken the trade union movement, or can it be a source of strength for the unions and all the forces working for social change? The circumstances of working class women, when Lenin spoke of them as the greatest reserve of the working class, were those of drudgery, few had the right to vote, and those actually in the work force were small in number. In the present industrial society sheer physical strength is less important although "women's work" is quite often menial, repetitive and unskilled. Women are not, however, called on to be drudges. Labor saving devices have cut down on heavy household chores, the vote has long been universal so that women's votes have considerable influence in determining the results of parliamentary elections. As a third of the work force employed in most spheres of industry and commerce, in government and private enterprise service industries, and in professional occupations, they are an essential component of Australia's economy and can no more be done without than the rest of the work force.

It is possible for women to respond to the needs of the labor market not only because modern techniques of home care and marketing are available to them, but because of the trends of earlier marriage, smaller families (again in part due to scientific developments), and earlier completion of child bearing. While some problems have been solved, more will have to be faced and solved if a greater proportion of women are to be maintained in the work force. Women with large families find it very difficult to carry the burden of two jobs. Many others with young children, where they are not forced by economic factors into working to provide housing and other necessities, remain at home because of the shortage of proper pre-school facilities, and the lack of part-time working opportunities to enable them to combine satisfactorily, the roles of worker, mother, wife.

Until recently the age group over 45 years seemed too old for employers to consider; but now there is growing realisation that such women will often work for a considerable number of years and the fact that they will not have their work interrupted by pregnancies or sick children, is seen as an advantage. But these women have to be encouraged out of their homes. Often their homes were bought before land prices were inflated; they have their furniture and their children are off their hands. Their tradition was to work only until marriage. If they worked at all, after marriage, it was on a temporary basis as during World War II. It is on women in this section that many school committees, women's organisations and charities depend for fund raising and other activities. These organisations are now being seriously affected as few replacements appear to take the place of a generation of women who will
be the last of their kind — those who made home duties their life’s work.

A growing number of mainly younger women now see their employment as a permanent condition, perhaps a necessity, often a burden but permanent nevertheless. Unlike the first wave of post-war women workers who sought employment, temporarily, to provide for a particular family need, they realise that two incomes are necessary to provide a home, a standard of living, and savings for those periods when they have babies. Child-bearing is a temporary interruption and work is resumed if and when suitable arrangements are made for the care of the children.

It is accepted then that most women go to work because they need the money, as men do. Rents or home repayments are seldom less than half the State basic wages or the Federal minimum wage (all under $40). Refrigerators, washing machines, T.V. and the motor car are now considered essentials in many families. It is less than an answer to appeal to women in 1970 to make do with one wage, an ice chest, a wash board, a crystal radio and a push bike. And just as those innovations of another period did not bourgeoisify the working class neither do today’s essentials make the working class, magically, middle class. The car, an enormous drain on family income, is a very real need where public transport is inadequate and where inflated land prices have forced workers to live far away from their work place. And presumably, the only way to get the benefit of the super-market specials is to have a car to carry the stuff home.

Widespread higher education for children and young adults are new expenses which are required to be met in the technological age. In one sense the wage of the working mother replaces the wage contributions of children who, not so long ago, were expected to contribute to earnings once they reached 14 years of age. Just as the earnings of fathers and children did not mean affluence, so in today’s conditions, even the two income family tends to just get by.

As one third of the decisive force for radical change and socialism, and with the same potential for industrial and political action against monopoly capitalism as have other workers, women workers are now much more than reserves of the working class. However the realization of this potential will depend on all forces of the left, and particularly the left in the trade unions with its militant industrial and political experience. Only 4 of every 10 women workers belong to trade unions so the first important stage for their working class education is to plan attractive and convincing “join your union” campaigns.
Becoming a wage earner does not automatically make a woman convinced of the need to join a trade union, or even to become aware of her exploitation by the monopoly owners of production. This awareness has to be engendered by the political and class conscious forces in the trade unions. The involvement of working women in actions for their needs is the best environment for their class conscious development. Education through struggle is far more convincing than all the best written propaganda and speeches. Many women workers do not even know what a union is for, where to go to join, their award rights, how a union functions, and so on. Some women believe that basic wage increases every year are granted by the courts and the government, and the unions carry out the orders of the courts. Other women conclude that if unions are not doing anything about their particular problems, there's no point in paying union fees. Other women who are members of trade unions whose leaderships are ideologically opposed to militant action, or are indifferent to their needs, see these trade unions as part of the Establishment and some are afraid of joining a union in case the boss finds out and victimisation follows. Many women, unorganised and left alone to fight their own battles against the boss, have accepted the anti-union propaganda of the monopolies and the daily press.

The question is who is going to win the support of working women? The employers who blame high prices on wage increases and equal pay, and who say that communists and other militants in the unions are there to stir up trouble and provoke useless strikes, or the left which can only win the support of working women for progressive policies if they vigorously campaign for their needs, and assist them assert their rights in industry, trade unions and society? In this regard, the politically advanced women in all sections of the left (workers and students) can give valuable assistance to working women by convincing the organisations they belong to (trade union, women and student organisations) to take up these issues of concern to working women.

Where some unions with militant leaderships have encouraged women to take action to get some demand, experiences show that women will respond — enthusiastically. There is the example of members of the Liquor Trades Union who in 1967 went on strike for equal pay. The strong support of many men workers gave the women much encouragement. In some cases the militancy of many women encouraged some less-militant male workers to support the strike. This action won equal pay long before any arbitration court hearings.

This year when the same Union held a stop work meeting to protest against the actions of some big retailers who had employed
non-union labor to do the work of men and women restaurant workers on strike against the penal powers, over 500 (mostly women) packed the Sydney lower Town Hall. Their action brought quick agreement by the retailers to the union’s demands.

Other good examples may be found in the work of the Teachers’ Federation with its original and up-to-date democratic organizational forms and publicity which has encouraged so many teachers (especially women) to join in a successful campaign for equal pay and now for better working conditions and higher educational standards. The Sheet Metal Workers’ Union and others have also set out to encourage their women members to take militant action for equal pay and better working conditions.

Most militant actions involving women workers have taken place during working hours, on and off the work-places. Experiences show that women workers do not readily respond to meetings called after work. Family responsibilities after work prohibit many women from going out again, besides the physical strain of working all day and doing household duties after work leaves little time or energy for meetings. It should be obvious then that the involvement of working women in union campaigns has to be planned at job level, and for job level action.

The demands around which women workers can be organised arise out of the conditions in which they find themselves. Many working mothers with pre-school and school age children find it almost impossible to arrange suitable pre-school and after-school care for their children. Where suitable places are available, they are often too expensive for working class families, and especially if there is more than one child to be cared for. This problem has been almost ignored by governments and employers, except for periodical mention at employers’ conferences. It is a matter of concern that as yet very few trade unions regard this problem of the working mother seriously either.

In an article “‘Getting With’ the Working Women” (Tribune, August 13, 1969), Alice Hughes (State Secretary Union of Australian Women) points out that many countries in Europe, North America and Latin America are far more advanced in their provision of child care facilities than is Australia, and one would think that we were living in a backward part of the world instead of a country, that by world standards, is one of the most affluent. She also states that in 1966, of all children in Australia between the age of 3-5 years, only one in twelve (a total less than 60,000) attended pre-school centres, and even the majority of these are short-hour centres and of very little assistance to working mothers. The monthly bulletin of a local Communist Party Branch stated that thirteen
thousand under-fives in the North Sydney area have to compete for 200 kindergarten places. The lack of child-care facilities is not the only issue. Paid maternity leave, compassionate leave to look after their sick children, shopping time, are rare exceptions in awards and agreements covering the employment of working mothers.

When it comes to wages women workers make up the biggest section of the lower paid workers. Most are paid only 75% of the male wage, and large numbers of them are employed in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Even if they did get equal pay, women in these jobs would still come within the category of low paid workers. Many women workers are barred from skilled occupations and, therefore, higher pay mainly because opportunities for education and training have been limited and because of outdated social and economic prejudices and fears, many trade unions have not taken steps to assist women to assert their right to apprenticeship training.

Migrant women are among those who work in the lowest of all low paid jobs, and often under conditions that would not be tolerated by most Australian workers. A high proportion of these women do not understand English, and trade union leaflets and publicity do not help them. Few unions have migrant organisers, and very few unions have material translated into other languages. For the migrant woman worker, especially with a large family, working full time, travelling long distances to work and back, and with language difficulties, life can be very burdensome. Ways must be found to assist these inexperienced and unorganised women.

The recent equal pay judgment and its very limited application of equal pay to so few women shows the need for widespread and consistent militant action if women are ever going to achieve equal pay. Shorter working hours, a living wage, pre-school and after school needs, paid maternity leave, re-training programs, tax allowances for household assistance, apprenticeships, suitable employment for women graduates, equal pay and equal opportunity in employment — all these are urgent issues for women workers, and are the ones that the unions should be taking up on their behalf. During the course of organising women in support of these, the ideas of workers' control should be advanced.

It is on these questions that the left, especially in the trade unions, should come forward in defence of the rights of working women. Any organisation, whether trade union, women's or political, which claims to function in the interests of the working class, unless it orientates its work to include activities in support of the needs of working women — especially young women — will become divorced from the great social and economic problems of our times.