Challenging and maintaining the traditional gender order: labour movement responses to women workers in the metal industry, and to equal pay, during World War II

Beverley Symons

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CHALLENGING AND MAINTAINING THE TRADITIONAL GENDER ORDER:
LABOUR MOVEMENT RESPONSES TO WOMEN WORKERS IN THE METAL INDUSTRY,
AND TO EQUAL PAY, DURING WORLD WAR II

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from the

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

BEVERLEY SYMONS B.A. (Hons.)
University of Wollongong

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND POLITICS

December 1997
I HEREBY CERTIFY that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Beverley Symons
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the reactions of the Curtin Labor Government, employer organisations, trade unions, the Communist Party of Australia and other labour movement groups, to the entry of women workers into 'men's jobs' on munitions production and other areas of the metal industry during the Second World War. Motivated primarily by their concern that the employment of cheap female labour threatened male jobs and wage standards, the union movement demanded that the women entering industry receive the same pay rates as the men they were replacing. Rather than institute equal pay by regulation, however, the Government decided on the compromise solution of establishing a special wage-fixation tribunal, the Women's Employment Board, and empowering it to award pay rates between 60% and 100% of the male rate assessed on the basis of the female workers' relative efficiency and productivity. This unique wage-fixing method was a radical departure from the entrenched 'family wage' basis long followed by the Commonwealth Arbitration Court under which female wage rates were set at around 54% of the minimum male rate. However, the potential it represented for a significant change in women's secondary position in the workforce, was contained.

A primary concern of the thesis is to assess the relative influence of patriarchal ideology and Marxist theory, and of social, political, economic and industrial factors, on the attitudes and practices of key actors towards the issue of equal pay; also, the extent to which the traditional gender order was challenged by the wartime shift in the 'normal' sexual division of labour. It illustrates how the impetus for equal pay became dissipated during the second half of the war, in the face of pragmatic political and economic pressures and the dominant pattern of gender relations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My foremost appreciation goes to my supervisor, Andrew Wells, whose support for the thesis assisted me in maintaining the momentum to completion. He was at all times a first-rate supervisor, whose discussions of ideas and theories and of the complexities of people's personal and political responses to social change, stimulated me to extend my questioning and research. I greatly appreciate all the help Andrew gave me, especially his confidence in the project and in my capacity to complete it.

I am also very grateful for the support given by my close friend and comrade, Eric Aarons, whose patience and encouragement helped to sustain my will to finish. His insightful comments on the draft chapters were very helpful, as were his first-hand memories of daily life and political events during the Second World War.

My thanks go also to my Wollongong 'sisters', Vicki Crinis and Hazel England, for their friendship and solidarity.
ABBREVIATIONS

ACM  Associated Chambers of Manufactures
ACT  Australian Capital Territory
ACTU Australasian Council of Trade Unions
AEU  Amalgamated Engineering Union
ANA  Australian National Airways
ALP  Australian Labor Party
APM  Australian Paper Manufacturers
AWA  Amalgamated Wireless Australasia
CAEP Council of Action for Equal Pay
CC  Commonwealth Council (of the Amalgamated Engineering Union)
CPA  Communist Party of Australia
CWWW Council for Women in War Work
FCU  Federated Clerks' Union
FED&FA Federated Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Association
FIA  Federated Ironworkers' Association of Australia
IRC  Industrial Relations Council
LWCOC Labor Women's Central Organising Committee
MTA  Metal Trades Award
MTEA Metal Trades Employers' Association
MWG  Militant Women's Group
MWM  Militant Women's Movement
MP  Member of Parliament
NSW New South Wales
% per cent
PSA  Public Service Association
SA  South Australia
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAF</td>
<td>Small Arms Factory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMWU</td>
<td>Sheet Metal Working Industrial Union of Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THC</td>
<td>Trades Hall Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAP</td>
<td>United Australia Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAW</td>
<td>United Associations of Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEB</td>
<td>Women's Employment Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOC</td>
<td>Women's Organising Committee</td>
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