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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

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.

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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

SAF	Small Arms Factory
SMWU	Sheet Metal Working Industrial Union of Australia
THC	Trades Hall Council
UAP	United Australia Party
UAW	United Associations of Women
WA	Western Australia
WEB	Women's Employment Board
WOC	Women's Organising Committee

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