Tension between feminists working within the industrial relations system and the sections of the women's movement who are highly critical of institutions like the ACTU is best illustrated by the debate over equal pay. Despite the Arbitration Commission's test case decisions in 1969 and 1972, equal pay has not been achieved in practice because women are concentrated in relatively low-paid sections of the workforce: service industries such as cleaning or childcare, semi-skilled production work in factories, occupations like nursing. In turn, the reason many of these areas are low-paid is because the Australian industrial relations system has traditionally used the male-dominated blue-collar trade and craft skills as yardsticks for assessing the "work value" of different kinds of skills. In the United States this problem led to the emergence of "comparable worth", a technique designed to evaluate the worth of different jobs by a comparison of the tasks comprising them. Many within the Australian women's movement advocate the comparable worth approach. In 1985 the commission specifically rejected an ACTU test case seeking endorsement of the comparable worth concept and reasserting the traditional "work value" concept. Since then women in the labour movement like Jennie George have instead concentrated on using the minimum rates adjustment process under award restructuring and the new emphasis in industrial relations on encouraging and recognising skills formation to gradually realign pay rates between female- and male-dominated occupations and industries.

"The trouble with the debate about equal pay and the comparable worth arguments," says George, "is they are fine debates to have but what we have got to do is find the mechanisms of actually doing things to redress the situation. I don't disagree with the principle of comparable worth but...it is clear that in the Australian context the pursuit of comparable worth is not going to be accommodated."

George traces her political commitment to the labour movement, her feminist principles and her views of the importance of education to her childhood experiences. Her Russian parents, displaced during World War Two and unwilling to return to the Soviet Union under Stalin, arrived in Australia in 1950. In straitened circumstances during their early years in this country, her parents separated. On a kitchen hand's wages, her mother had responsibility for a growing daughter and an aged mother. "I grew up in a female household with my mother and grandmother, and I learnt an empathy for people who don't have it so easy. My mother had a strong belief in the value of education as a means of getting out of that predicament. She had studied geology at the University of Rostov but the war had put an end to it. That angered me that here was this intelligent person who had never had the opportunities to make it."

George decided to train as a teacher because the scholarship included a more generous living allowance than Commonwealth scholarships. At university during the late 1960s she was active in the Trainee Teachers Club (a branch of the NSW Teachers Federation) and joined the anti-Vietnam War movement and the Eureka Youth League—the latter organisation linked to the Communist Party. She met and later married Paddy George, a CPA member who strongly influenced her political views but who died tragically of cancer in 1980. Ms George has never been a member of a political party, although she did think about joining the ALP when she moved to Melbourne in 1989 to take up her current position as assistant national director of the Trade Union Training Authority. "All my political interests are focused on the union movement. Frankly the prospect of going along to meetings and engaging in factional struggles, usually over who is going to be pre-selected for a seat, doesn't capture my imagination."

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