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SHOULD UNIONS BE CONCERNED ABOUT MIGRANT WOMEN WORKERS?

By "Migrant Women" we mean women from non-English-speaking countries. English-speaking women do not face the complex problems these women face. Because they share with Australians the same language and culture, English-speaking women find the acclimatization process less traumatic.

In many areas there is a high proportion of migrant women who do not participate in union affairs.

WHY AREN'T MIGRANT WOMEN ACTIVE IN UNIONS?

A large percentage of migrant women begin to work outside their homes for the first time in their lives when they come to Australia. They are unaware of industrial and union procedures. Frequently they are not even unionized. They do not know their rights or how to go about demanding the implementation of union rules and conditions. Nonetheless they join the ranks of industrial workers.

In the past the union hierarchy have not regarded migrant women as an integral part of the trade union movement. They have used as an excuse the women's lack of involvement in union meetings and their unwillingness to bring their complaints and grievances to the union representatives. Many interpret this lack of involvement and action as signifying that the women are not interested in union affairs. They presume that their intention is to supplement the family earnings until their husbands secure better positions and then retire back to the home. Unions therefore regard the women's time in the workforce as temporary and do not feel it is worthwhile revising policies for their sake.

However, as more than 60% of the female industrial labour force, their potential strength should not be ignored. If the unions want to expand their membership they will have to convince these potential members that the unions are concerned about their affairs.

Because of the unions' attitude to date migrant women have no incentive to take part in union affairs. They see that most of the shop stewards and organizers are English-speaking Australians. Union meetings are about "award rates", "over-award payments", "arbitration disputes" etc. Moreover the meetings are conducted in the limited and specialist jargon of the trade unions and in a very formal way - and of course in English. Newsletters, notices, even trade union journals are also all in English.

It is little wonder that migrant women do not participate. They cannot. They lack all the skills necessary for active participation, i.e. a knowledge of unionism and its vocabulary and procedures. More important - in most cases they cannot speak English.

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO TO HELP?

Unions must accept the challenge that migrant women create. They must recognize the fact that these women are an indispensable part of the labour force and, as such, their needs and rights have to be considered.

The following are some issues which should be taken up by unions:

1. Instruction in the workings of trade unions - either during the first few weeks at work or for a few hours each week.
2. Teaching of English during working hours and without loss of pay. This is not so difficult as it may at first appear. There are many capable interpreters in the community. Up till now access

to these people has been difficult because of lack of a proper migrant resource directory. However quite a few organizations are now active in compiling such directories. These, when available, should be distributed amongst employers and trade unions who can then draw upon the various interpreters. For a project like this to succeed the lessons must be made relevant. They must deal with work issues: safety regulations, workers' compensation, maternity leave, social benefits, retraining, unemployment benefits, invalid pensions etc..

3. Whilst the women are learning English union meetings should be conducted in all languages spoken at the workplace. Motion sheets should be printed in all languages.
4. Most important - migrant women must be assisted to take their place in the management and leadership of their job organizations and trade unions.

Only through implementation of the above can migrant women finally become an active part of the trade union movement. And only thus can the union movement hope to reach its full potential.

CHILDCARE NEEDS

Childcare was discussed in Discussion Paper No. 2 but the special requirements of migrant women necessitate a separate treatment. Migrant women face a tremendous cultural shock on arriving in Australia. The Southern European women come from cultures where the extended family is predominant. The whole family - aunts, cousins, grandmothers - take part in child-rearing. The mother has willing and constant help and people to whom she can refer. She is not so tightly bound to her offspring as are Australian women. Moreover in her own society she was familiar with the government and voluntary agencies to which she could appeal for assistance. She knew and understood nurses, teachers, babysitters. She had people to whom she could turn outside her immediate family.

On arriving in Australia she is faced with a new language, few or no acquaintances, no job, no security. She is forced to rely on herself. What makes her situation even more unsettled is that in most cases she has to go out to work before she has become familiar with the institutions which exist to aid her.

Under present conditions the only widely available child-minding facilities for migrant women are private ones. These are found through neighbours, workmates or from hearsay. The few child-minding centres run by councils are unknown to them. It is not surprising, therefore, that migrant women become involved in such unsatisfactory arrangements as untrained personnel, unsuitable conditions, unsafe dwellings, over-charging, lack of proper supervision. Although many migrant parents recognize the unsatisfactory nature of their childcare arrangements, they would rather keep their children in the charge of persons of the same ethnic background than place them in council centres.

EFFECTS OF LACK OF SUITABLE CHILDCARE

Because of the lack of suitable childcare facilities many migrants have sent their children back to their relatives in their native land. When the children return to Australia they are estranged from their parents and have to start learning English language and Australian customs and so the problem starts all over again.

Many industrial accidents occur because parents worry about their children's safety and cannot concentrate on the job they are doing. The loss of industrial time and money and the hardship to union members is obvious.

Many migrant parents work different shifts so that one parent can be at home to mind the children while the other is at work. This arrangement puts the family relationship under tremendous stress and can undermine the health of the parents - especially the mother who

finds herself doing the housework, preparing meals and minding the children during the day and then rushing off to work at night.

HOW CAN THE UNIONS ASSIST?

1. Pressure the government and local councils and employers to provide -

community-based childcare centres.

Such community-based centres should be open 24 hours a day to cope with the needs of shift-workers, nurses and the extra activities of parents such as union meetings and English classes.

Community-based childcare needs staff recruited from the different ethnic groups in a particular area. Therefore unions should -

2. Urge the Health Department to revise its strict regulations so as to allow more casual childcare centres to operate. The regulations applying to staff qualifications should especially be revised.

There are many migrant women who enjoy caring for children or who have children of their own and would be prepared to mind other children. At the moment the skills and talents of these women are wasted, either because they are isolated at home just caring for their own children or because they are working in menial unrewarding jobs.

With a loosening of the Health Department's regulations such women could find employment caring for children and could at the same time contribute to the maintenance of the children's cultural heritage.