



Working Women's Information Service

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A HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE AUSTRALIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT



The history of women in trade unions in Australia has been one of long and bitter struggle.

Until federation women acted in a supportive role to men and battled to organise themselves into unions. Since federation their struggles have been centred around the fight for equal pay. However, although the struggle has not been in vain, equal pay is still not a reality. The basis for its attainment was laid in the 1972 Equal Pay Case and the trade union movement as a whole has benefited from the activities of its women participants.

From the first days of white settlement women have played an important role in the formation of the labour movement and the trade unions.

In the goldfields they warned the diggers when troopers were approaching, carried food at night to men hidden in the bush and often grappled with troops until hunted men had time to escape.

In 1827 convict women at the Female Factory at Parramatta rebelled against their overseers when rations of tea and sugar were withdrawn. The women immediately went on strike but officials still refused the rations. Early one morning the women charged their overseers, broke down the factory doors and escaped. They marched to the township and confiscated supplies of bread and meat. Skirmishes broke out with troops sent to recapture them and the women returned to the factory only after they had been promised that there would be no repercussions from their action and that their usual rations of tea and sugar would be resumed. This was the first rebellion staged by women in Australia - and they were victorious.

The first union of women workers in Australia, and perhaps in the world, was also the first union to involve the Victorian Trades Hall Council in the planning and co-ordinating of a strike. This precedent proved very important for the battles which were to follow in the 1890's.

In 1882 the Victorian Tailoresses Union was formed after a walk-out by tailoresses in one factory whose wages had been cut and who wanted improved conditions. The tailoresses approached the Trades Hall Council and asked for their support in forming a union. Soon it had two thousand members who all went on strike in support of a log of claims which was presented and eventually won from employers. The word "log" was coined during this dispute. It referred to the catalogue which was the list of prices paid to tailoresses for different pieces of work on various garments.

The tailoresses received great public support and their strike, which was co-ordinated from the Trades Hall, is said to have stimulated the growth of trade unionism which followed it and which led to legal recognition of trade unions in the same year. The strike was also partly responsible for a parliamentary inquiry into allegations of "sweating" in factories in Victoria. The inquiry led to Australia's first Factory Act.

In 1891 women working as waitresses, barmaids and laundresses organized the Female Employees Union in New South Wales which was intended to embrace all women workers. Four months after its inception it organized a strike in defence of a laundress who had been sacked because of her union activities. The strike received widespread support and membership of the union grew rapidly. However the following year the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council laid charges against the union and it was forced to disband.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the question of women's suffrage was raised. Many of the women who led the fight for female franchise were from the trade union movement. Catherine Helen Spence campaigned within the trade union movement for women's suffrage and in 1886 the Adelaide Trades and Labour Council issued a statement of support for the demand.

Vida Goldstein was an active trade unionist who went to the United States of America in 1902 as an Australian delegate to an international women's conference and became one of three members of an international committee to campaign for women's suffrage.

A few women were also beginning to appear at the Congresses held by the trade union bodies and to emerge as prominent organisers of labour disputes. In 1894 two delegates from the Victorian Tailoresses Union became the first women to attend the Intercolonial Trade Union Congress in Melbourne. In 1900 Miss J. McCullum represented the Eastern Goldfields Tailoresses Union at the Western Australian Union and Labour Congress. Miss E.R. Henretty was a member of the Adelaide Trades and Labour Council for a number of years. Emma Miller who had helped to form a union of tailoresses in Brisbane in 1890 also played a very important part in organising the 1912 general strike.

After federation the Arbitration Court was established at the request of the trade union movement. However it brought little joy to women who became tied by its ruling that women should receive only 54% of the basic rates of males. This was justified by an assumption that a man must provide for his wife and children whilst a woman needed only to provide for herself.

This ruling also meant that work needed to be defined as being for men or women. Otherwise women would carry an unfair advantage in the job market.

Employers responded to the ruling by trying increasingly to have more jobs classified as women's work and male trade unions defended their conditions by applying to have women expelled from most areas of employment. Women were forced into a very narrow range of occupations for which they received only 54% of male pay rates, and usually 54% of the male minimum rate.

In the twenties a section of the trade union movement, influenced by the feminism which had arisen out of the suffrage movement and led by Muriel Heagney, began to campaign for equal pay. It was becoming clear that whilst women received low wages they would continue to threaten wage conditions won by men.

During the depression this situation led to a great deal of hostility towards working women who were unfairly made the scapegoats of unemployment. In response, the Council of Action for Equal Pay was established in 1937 and consisted of delegates from trade unions with Heagney as its secretary. The Council's main concern was to fight for commitment to the concept of equal pay from the trade union movement as a whole.

The outbreak of the Second World War and the subsequent necessity to replace men by women workers meant that the sex segregation of the workforce could no longer protect male jobs from cheap female labour.

In 1941 the Australian Council of Trade Unions adopted a policy of equal occupational rates based on the nature of the job and not on the sex of the workers.

During the war large numbers of women entered the workforce and undertook a variety of work previously denied them. The women who replaced men received special rates determined by the Women's Employment Board. The Board was constituted to award women doing "men's" work 50-100% of the male rates and its determinations were based on the concept of equal pay for equal work.

The Board awarded most women 90% of the male rate which created great discrepancies with women in the textiles, clothing and food preserving industries who were still receiving 54%. This resulted in great industrial unrest and constant strikes by women and an increase in union membership

from 32.8% of the female workforce in 1939 to 51.9% in 1945.



The Women's Employment Board had broken with the tradition of wage determination on the basis of sex and introduced the concept of work value. This was a great breakthrough for women but it meant that they now had to prove their ability to do equal work.

After the Second World War, the female basic wage was raised from 54% to 70% of the male rate and the union movement had learnt that it was necessary to fight for equal pay.

In 1957 the Australian Council of Trade Unions Congress decided to convene a national conference of affiliated unions with women members to discuss equal pay and working conditions. In March 1958 that Conference used as a major argument the I.L.O. Convention and recommendation dealing with equal pay for work of equal value.

Calls to the Federal Liberal Government were unsuccessful even though the Government's own Minister for Labour had been the Chairman of the relevant sessions of the I.L.O.

In 1969 Equal Pay Cases were mounted. It was argued that social attitudes towards women and their own contribution to the economy had altered greatly over the 60-year period. Since the Commission no longer placed emphasis on needs of working people in determining basic wage rates, it was inappropriate to use a needs argument to maintain a lower rate for female workers.

The employers still argued that the difference currently existing between male and female rates was not based simply on sex discrimination but, to a large extent, on family responsibility.

One group of employers said that if the claim were granted it might lead to a redistribution of income in favour of females. They argued that the court was being asked to implement a major piece of social engineering on theoretical and doctrinal grounds which would interfere with a wage system which had operated for many years.

The result of the Commission's decision was in fact that women school-teachers were the only sizeable group to be awarded equal pay. Women, with the support of the trade union movement, continued to campaign for better pay rates. Many women were involved in a range of activities which included chaining themselves to the Arbitration Commission building and refusing to pay full fares on public transport.

Finally in 1972 the Commission made a decision that equal pay for work of equal value was to be established in principle for all Australian female workers. Even so, it was to be awarded in three increments to meet full parity on June 30, 1975.

In 1973 women in the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations (ACSPA) initiated discussions with that Council's Federal Secretary, which led in 1974 to an Executive committee of ACSPA being formed to provide specialist advice on women's issues. That committee provided such advice and recommended the establishment of a Working Women's Centre.

Federal government funding was granted and the Centre was opened on September 15, 1975, with the aims of increasing the involvement of women in trade unions and providing resources to aid unions in their struggles on behalf of female members.

One of the Centre's first tasks in 1975 was to draft a Working Women's Charter which identified the rights of all working women. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Congress in 1977 adopted a similar Charter (a Charter for Working Women). Women unionists all over Australia formed charter groups to ensure that the terms of the Charter were implemented in industry.

In 1979 the ACTU mounted a test case for maternity leave and was successful in obtaining from the Arbitration Commission the right to 12 months' unpaid leave. This was a breakthrough for all women - particularly those who had been campaigning for many years on this issue. It helped to recognise women as permanent parts of the workforce by establishing continuity of employment.

The struggles of women for equal rights and equal opportunities have gone hand in hand with trade union aspirations although at times there has been apparent conflict between the two. However, as the gulf between the social roles of men and women decrease, the commitment of women to trade unions and of trade unions to women increase.