

Women Will Rise! Recalling the Working Women's Charter.
Gay Simpkin and Marie Russell (eds). Steele Roberts Aotearoa, 2022.
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Reviewed by Phoebe Kelloway.

Editors Marie Russell and the late Gay Simpkin set out to share knowledge about the late 1970s campaign for the Working Women's Charter with a younger generation. Their book provides interesting insights into the history of both the trade union movement and the struggle for women's rights in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. The Charter was a set of sixteen demands aimed at redressing the inequity and oppression women faced in the workplace and beyond, like "a bill of rights for working women" (21). Its clauses ranged from demands for equality and an end to all discrimination, to access to childcare and reproductive rights. The first five chapters are largely focused on the efforts to win support for it within the labour movement.

Personal recollections are a strong feature of the book: most of the authors campaigned for the Charter while they were organisers or officials of unions with a large female membership. Therese O'Connell and Martha Coleman were both outraged by the blatant gender inequality that confronted them at work in the 1970s. Young women like them, drawn to the movement because they were keen to fight back, found themselves in a minority in union structures, where the leadership was overwhelmingly male. Yet despite the backwardness of social conditions, the Charter's proponents convinced union members. Two years after they'd first moved it, the Federation of Labour (FOL) conference adopted the Working Women's Charter as policy, in 1980.

The participant accounts of Chapters 1 to 5 outline how they waged this successful fight, and give context for it. Hazel Armstrong unearths the 1930s and 40s campaigning by Communist women for a Working Women's Charter, efforts unknown to those who took up the fight in the 70s. Therese O'Connell explores the political differences between the similar-sounding Working Women's Council and Working Women's Alliance, the latter's activity, and the role of women's committees in unions. Sue Kedgley, who situates the Charter struggle within New Zealand's women's liberation movement, describes it as bringing renewed focus just as the movement was starting to splinter. Helen Pearce details how debate over the Charter within the Post-Primary Teachers' Association centred on abortion rights. The clause on women's reproductive rights had been expected to cause controversy among union members, however O'Connell shows evidence that the Charter was opposed more by some male officials than the rank-and-file, who were generally supportive. These chapters cover union officials' forums well, but have less about campaigning for the Charter among ordinary members, including the hundreds of meetings held around the country. Perhaps this is because most members did not raise objections, but readers may wonder how they responded and what they wanted to discuss.

Chapters 6 to 8 take a close look at matters that did not feature prominently in debates about the Charter, but remain significant ongoing problems. Martha Coleman gives an informative concise overview of the fight for equal pay: the struggle for legislation in the public and private sectors up to 1972, then how employers evaded it and unions resumed the battle in the late 1970s and mid-80s, including through concerted strike action. Despite the legislation, pay equity has remained elusive. Wendy Davis and Gay Simpkin's chapter on dealing with sexual harassment begins with an explanation of why it was not mentioned in the Charter: discussion of it as a form of discrimination against women had only recently begun. They outline how activism in the union movement to combat workplace sexual harassment led to 1987 legislation making it unlawful. Linda Hill, noting the Charter's demands for an end to racial discrimination,

examines why Māori and Pasifika women still experience a large pay gap compared to both Pākehā women and men. She makes a compelling case that labour market segregation by gender and ethnicity is the cause of this devastating inequity. The chapter updates a 2018 Coalition for Equal Value Equal Pay paper, which lawyers used for the Mana Wāhine claim at the Waitangi Tribunal, in which Māori women are trying to hold the Crown to account for discrimination against them.

Marie Russell, in the final chapter, provides a clause-by-clause assessment of key developments in the forty years since the FOL adopted the Charter. Working-class women have made important gains, but there is still a lot to fight for. While there has been progress in some respects, neoliberal policies imposed by both Labour and National governments have had detrimental effects. Judy Attenberger called for more protesting, arguing “we cannot just rely on politicians to do this for us”. The abortion rights struggle illustrates her point: within months of the Labour Party adopting the Charter in 1980, its leader Bill Rowling backtracked on its pro-choice commitment. Abortion was not taken out of the Crimes Act until 2020. Grace Millar observes that the greatest gains – she highlights childcare and equal pay – have been made on demands that the union movement fought for in workplaces: “unions remain the most effective way for working women to organise”. Contributors also note how waging the fight for the Charter made an important impact in itself. Numerous women making the arguments won over many more people than they would have if union leaders had simply agreed to it, and they gained confidence that they brought to further campaigns. Women’s involvement in the union movement increased as a result too, including in leadership.

Women Will Rise! is accessible for a general audience, with clear writing throughout. The text is enhanced by a variety of images, including campaign posters and photos of activists and women at work, and by insets of contemporary documents and additional participants’ recollections. References (which are sometimes omitted from books less aimed at academics) and recommended reading are usefully included. The reader doesn’t need much prior knowledge of Aotearoa’s union or feminist movements to appreciate this history. The book is somewhat let down by repetitious content between chapters, which sometimes feels unnecessary. However, those with a particular interest in the subject will value the accounts of individual Charter activists despite areas of overlap. Overall, it’s an insightful read which deserves to achieve its aim of introducing the Charter’s history to a new audience.