

SYMPOSIUM: WOMEN AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Introduction: Women and industrial relations: a neglected area of research.

In October 1982, after I had agreed to edit this symposium, I wrote to 22 women I knew to be either active or interested in the industrial relations system in New Zealand, asking them to consider submitting an article. Notice of the symposium also appeared in the December 1982 issue of the *journal*. Eighteen months later we print 3 of the 6 articles submitted for the symposium. Helen Cook adopts a Marxist perspective on the development of political consciousness among childcare workers and the establishment of the Early Childhood Workers Union. Cathy Wylie's article is an anthropologist's view of shop floor industrial relations at the Gear freezing works, Petone, in 1975 when women had begun to take on jobs which had hitherto been male preserves. Gerard Griffin and John Benson take a statistical look at the attitudes of women insurance workers in the Australian Insurance Employees Union.

Despite these contributions, and the considerable literature on women's employment issues, it remains the case that women's role in industrial relations has received relatively little scholarly attention. While I had hoped that the symposium would have included more articles, it is understandable that few women who are involved in the industrial relations system have the time, the desire or the detachment to write about their role and the issues that preoccupy them daily. We must therefore look to academics to study and analyse the developments within the industrial relations system which affect women. This journal is one publication which has made a contribution to these issues. Since 1981, it has published 5 other articles directly related to women and industrial relations: 'Maternity leave legislation: the timidity of the New Zealand approach' (1981); a note on 'Family leave provisions in New Zealand industrial documents' (1981); a review article on 'Women and pay' (1981); 'Women, work and recession: the other face of unemployment' (1982); and 'Invisible workers: women, redundancy and unemployment' (1982).

What, then, needs to be done? The study of industrial relations is multidisciplinary. I hope that researchers will give their attention to the studies which cry out to be made of women and industrial relations. The effects of several pieces of recent industrial legislation should be monitored to assess their impact on women. What effect has the removal of restrictions on outwork in the Factories and Commercial Premises Act 1981 had on the pay and conditions of women who work in factories and those who produce goods in their own homes for sale by others? Has the Human Rights Commission Act 1977 helped to overcome discrimination against women in the industrial relations field? What has been the impact of the Maternity Leave and Employment Protection Act 1980 on employers' attitudes to employing women and on the use of maternity leave? How will the Industrial Relations Amendment Act 1983, which introduced voluntary unionism, affect the pay and conditions of women workers and the nature and strength of their unions, especially those in the female-dominated clerical, retailing and services sectors of the workforce? What has been the impact of the Shop Trading Hours Act 1981 on women's employment conditions and patterns of full-time and part-time work in the retail trade? What will be the effect of the State Services Conditions of Employment Amendment Act 1983 on the conditions of service state sector unions can promote to attain equal opportunities for women and

men within the State services?

It would be interesting and instructive to learn how the Working Women's Charter is affecting the policies, structure and actions of unions which have adopted it. When (if) wage bargaining is allowed to resume, will the clauses of the charter start to appear among the claims of unions in wage and salary negotiations, and, more importantly, will such clauses make their way into the awards and determinations themselves.

Unless some research is carried out, we will remain ignorant of the extent to which growing unemployment is encouraging efforts by women to go into self-employment, to establish co-operatives or to work as individuals producing goods in their own homes. If these are indeed trends, they must have implications for mainstream industrial relations.

Geare, Herd and Howells' empirical study "Women in trade unions" was published in 1979. One would have expected that by now we should be seeing analyses of the roles and attitudes of women in industrial relations positions in management, women employers, and women who work for and are elected to positions in employers' associations and the Employers' Federation.

Recent years have seen the emergence of increasing numbers of feminists into active roles within unions. It is time there were qualitative analyses of the role of these women activists and their impact on the nature of trade unions and the priorities those unions promote. The women's advisory committees of the Federation of Labour and of some trades councils, feminist groups and advisory committees within unions, informal networks of feminist unionists must be having some effect: What is it?

With one exception, women are notably absent from the mediation, conciliation and Arbitration Court ranks. This phenomenon in itself is worthy of study. Comparative studies of the roles and attitudes of women working for unions and those working for employers in industrial relations would also be useful. It would be interesting to monitor the involvement of women in the policy-making structures of the Employers' Federation, the Federation of Labour, the Combined State Unions, trades councils and employers' associations, and in the teams negotiating over wages and salaries and the tripartite wage talks.

There are statutory bodies which have been established to advise the Government on policy affecting women. How much influence over Government industrial relations policy do advisory groups such as the Advisory Committee on Women's Affairs and the National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women have? A related question is: How much attention do parliamentary select committees give to submissions on industrial relations legislation from women's groups?

The possible effects of computer technology on the industrial relations system and on women's employment conditions and negotiating power in particular, have received considerable attention in recent years. Other current industrial relations issues deserving more study and public discussion include sexual harassment and prospects for permanent part-time work.

The general topic of women and industrial relations represents a vast field waiting to be mined by researchers, not just for the sake of knowledge and understanding, but also because such work, by stimulating awareness and encouraging action by women involved in industrial relations, can contribute to the process by which women attain their rightful place in the field.

Karen Roper
Symposium Editor

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