

Reviewed by Pat Ranaid\*

**T**his is an impressive collection of articles, which analyse women's changing conditions in the paid workforce, document their experiences as activists and officials in the union movement, and outline strategies for the future. The contributors are both academics and practitioners, while the papers are mainly based on Australian experiences, but included are contributions from the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom. The Foreword by Jennie George, President of the ACTU, both underlines women's progress in changing both workplaces and unions over the last two decades, and the challenges ahead for unions to become more inclusive and responsive to women's needs. The strategic growth areas of the workforce in these countries have shifted from manufacturing to service industries, precisely those areas in which women form the majority of paid workers. Unions themselves are also under sharp attack, especially since the changes in federal industrial legislation under the Howard government. Unions' survival will depend on their ability to recruit and retain women members.

Barbara Pocock notes in her introduction and the chapter on unions' industrial agendas that women's experiences in unions have always encompassed both strife with employers and strife with their male union counterparts. Many nineteenth century unions adopted the prevailing social assumptions that men were breadwinners and women their dependents. They sought to exclude women from 'male' defined jobs in the paid workforce and to confine women to a narrow range of 'female' defined jobs. The concept of the family wage, established in 1907 through the arbitration system, reinforced these gendered divisions. While it established a minimum safety net, it discriminated against women by assuming the norm was the male worker who supported a wife and children, and by setting the female wage at 54% of the male rate. But women have always been in the paid workforce, and have joined and been active both in existing unions, and in their own unions when excluded from male dominated ones. Women in unions and in non union feminist organisations led the long campaign for equal pay which began early this century, and gradually achieved official union support. (Support for equal pay increased significantly during World War II when women's labour was required for the war effort and men feared that women's lower pay would undermine male rates, but the women's rate

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dropped back to 75% of the male rate after the war.) 'Equal pay for work of equal value' was achieved in the 1970s, driven by women union activists from the modern women's movement. This meant that men and women doing the same work received the same pay. But there is still a gender gap between men's and women's average pay levels, due only partly to the larger number of women part time workers. Most traditionally 'female' occupations are still low paid because they have no direct male equivalents, are in areas of lower bargaining power and the skills they require are undervalued compared with traditional 'male' skills. The struggle for pay equity in female dominated occupations is ongoing. In the last two decades, women have also successfully placed parental leave, family leave and child care on the bargaining agenda, establishing national minimum standards for the former two through test cases run by the ACTU.

Pocock and Thompson note that these gains for women were achieved through collective bargaining and the centralised award system, which established legal minimum conditions on an industry basis, with recourse to the arbitration system and public scrutiny of awards and agreements. The move to enterprise based productivity bargaining from the late 1980s enabled some established conditions (but not those outlined above) to be traded off at the enterprise level in return for wage rises. Many women received no wage rises from enterprise based bargaining, as their employers simply did not wish to bargain. They received only minimal safety net increases decided nationally through the arbitration system.

The Howard government legislation to reduce worker rights to union representation and enable employers to offer individual contracts places established conditions under far greater threat. Although some basic conditions are meant to be included in all contracts, there is no public scrutiny or access by unions to contracts. The only scrutiny is by the government appointed employee advocate. Women are most vulnerable in this situation, as they are most likely to be in casual or precarious employment, where the alternative to the contract is unemployment.

Even where collective bargaining continues, issues of concern to women are often given lower priority unless unions ensure that their voices are heard. Surveys by Pocock and others show that both women and men share major concerns about job security, health and safety and working conditions. But women give greater priority to issues of discrimination/equal opportunity, equal pay, better career paths and flexibility of hours, while men are more concerned about wages and superannuation.

Pocock argues that a discussion of gender and unions should not centre only on 'women', but on men, women and the complex relations between

the two. A focus on women tends to obscure the fact that union culture is often 'saturated with masculinity' although it is not named as such. In much union discourse, especially in traditional male dominated areas of work, 'worker' often means 'male worker', and union agendas, culture and structures, from formal meeting times to socialising in the pub, often exclude women. Union organisation, agendas and culture must change. This critique and call for change is made from the position of support for the union project of empowering both women and men in the workplace through collective organisation to defend and improve their living and working conditions. In the face of major employer offensives to exclude unions and reduce working conditions, women need unions, and unions must change to enable their voices to be heard more clearly.

The Chapters on women's representation in unions show that their representation in leadership structures has improved, and has done so at a faster rate than women's representation in parliaments or in company boards or management. However, they are still under-represented in terms of their share of membership. Teachers, nurses and public sector unions, often with majorities of women members, are most likely to be led by women. But there are still large unions in areas like the retail and catering industries which have a majority of women members, but little representation of women in their leadership. Jude Elton points out that full time union employment and leadership is extremely demanding and traditionally has not made allowances for family responsibilities on the part of men or women. The traditional model of the full time official has been a *de facto* masculine model which assumes availability for work twelve hours a day while a full time wife or carer looks after the family. Most women and increasing numbers of men no longer live in this situation or accept its assumptions.

Women union officials face the conflicting demands of two 'greedy institutions', families and unions. But Elton's analysis and Suzanne Franzyway's and Lena Sudano's accounts of interviews with women union officials, show that barriers to women's leadership are not only associated with their double work burden. Women are also at times actively excluded by masculine models of leadership and informal networks, resistance to women's different leadership styles, and men's defensiveness of their positions and reluctance to stand aside. Cathie Muir deconstructs both mainstream and union media images of women unionists and union leaders to reveal some disturbing assumptions about masculinity, femininity and leadership. Elton concludes that strong women's caucuses and union af-

firmative action practices, including proportional representation of women in union structures and leadership, are needed to overcome these barriers.

Recent studies by Pocock and others show that women are no less prepared than men to join unions, and their main motivation for doing so is to protect their rights in the workplace. Women also want unions to show that they can properly represent them, and are less likely to join because they see unionism in the abstract as positive. In this context, Sally McManus uses case studies of successful organising of women in Australian unions to show that that the 'organising' models of union organisation and structure which seek to empower members may be more attractive to women than 'servicing' models which assign more passive role to members. This means not only recognising women's specific priorities, but also those of specific groups of women: young women, those of non English speaking background, and Aboriginal women.

McManus emphasises the possibility of more adventurous methods of recruiting and organising women. One of the most obvious is that women organisers are more likely to be able to recruit women members. More innovative is the use of women's existing networks, like community-based organisations, and other informal networks in addition to workplace based approaches. These vary from professional networks in the case of community services workers, to ethnic community organisations for industries where there are large numbers of non English speaking workers, to a union-sponsored float at the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

Several chapters describe the experience of organising women in Canada the US and the UK. These take up the issues of community organising in the USA, links and alliances between women in unions and other feminist organisations in Canada, and the 'self organising' model of union structures based around women's committees and other self defined members' groups, including black members, gay members and members with disabilities developed by the UK public sector union, UNISON.

This is a fascinating and provocative collection, which brings together a diverse range of up to date research. It is compelling reading for union officials, industrial relations academics and all those interested in contemporary workplace issues.