

# FRONT LINE

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*Women in the Metal Trades*

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Cover photo: Women turning the heads of 9mm cartridge cases on an automatic lathe at the Commonwealth Ammunition Factory, Footscray (Vic), during the second world war.  
*(Photo courtesy of Department of Supply)*

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# SURVEY

## The Economy

Tom O'Lincoln writes . . .

The inglorious end of the Fraser government's economic strategy was heralded by an article in Melbourne Age, printed in mid-November. The article was by Kenneth Davidson, the economics editor, and concerned a top-level meeting of Ministers which discussed economic strategy.

"It emerged at the meeting," wrote Davidson, "That a majority of the Cabinet — including the Prime Minister — are soft on devaluation." Only Lynch and Senator Cotton opposed devaluation." However Lynch brought in the Governor of the Reserve Bank, who budgeoned Fraser into changing his mind.

The picture was of a government that had lost its nerve. Fraser was becoming more and more aware that his economic strategy wasn't working. He had to deny the Age story in Parliament to quiet critics. But three weeks later, he dramatically confirmed Davidson's claims.

The devaluation means abandoning his whole economic approach, the very platform on which the government was elected.

Fraser was brought to power to certain things:

- 1 To discipline the working class, which Labor was thought unable to do.
- 2 To reduce wages.
- 3 To reduce inflation. If these three tasks could be accomplished it would restore business confidence and raise profits. That should lead to increased investment, and recovery would follow. So the theory went.

The government never tired of repeating that the first task was to beat inflation. Until inflation was stopped (at workers' expense, of course), there could be no healthy recovery.

Yet in pursuit of these aims, Fraser has done no better for the

ruling class than Labor would have done.

### STRIKES

The recession, which began in late 1974, had already begun to reduce the rate of strikes by early 1975. The rate of strikes has continued to decline under Fraser, but more slowly. These figures give the general picture:

Days lost in strikes	
Sept. 1973 to Aug. 1974	6,325,000
Sept. 1974 to Aug. 1975	3,465,000
Sept. 1975 to Aug. 1976	2,359,000
N.B.: the last figure does not include Medibank strikes.	

Obviously the trend toward reduction of strikes has not strengthened under the new government. And if the Medibank strikes are counted, you end with 4,032,000 days lost for the last year — an increase over the previous year.

Apart from the recession, the other cause of the reduction in strikes is undoubtedly wage indexation — a creation of the Labor government.

### WAGES

Real Wages have been reduced since the recession began. But if the "Econometer" section of the National Times is to be believed, this is mostly the result of the wage indexation

scheme introduced under Labor. Econometer points out that the wage-indexation system is structured to reduce wages — something that Marxists have pointed out from the start.

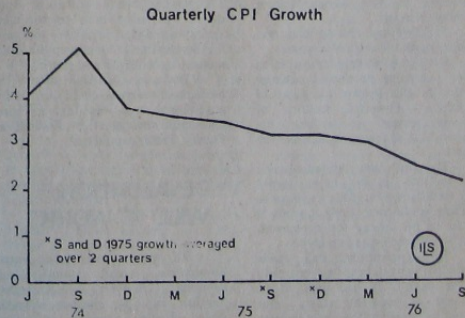
Fraser would have done well to leave the system alone.

Instead he attacked wage-indexation, by demanding less than full indexation. According to Econometer this has only resulted in a tiny extra reduction of real wages — a total of 0.7 percent so far. That is peanuts, but it does have the effect of discrediting wage-indexation in the eyes of the workers. The ACTU is less able to keep selling it to the rank and file.

### INFLATION

Inflation has been slowing down. However, that is none of Fraser's doing. It is the product of the recession, which began under Labor.

The graph shows clearly that the sharpest drop in inflation came in the last months of 1974. The rate of inflation then continued to decline gradually, with some fluctuation. The decline in inflation under Fraser has not been greater than under Labor. We have simply seen the continuation of a process that was well under way when the Liberals came to power.





## BUSINESS CONFIDENCE

Fraser was supposed to restore business confidence. The employers were indeed elated by his victory, but their elation has faded in the face of the government's weak economic performance.

The movements of share prices tell the story eloquently:

Share prices rose by about 20% or so in the first six months of the new government. But since the budget, they have fallen to a level lower than they were when the Liberals came into power.

Investment has not risen steadily. Following the same pattern as the share market, new capital expenditure rose in the first six months of this year, only to slump in the following months. Some industries continued to cut back production — the latest shock being the decision by AIS to cut back its work force by 1000 on the South Coast.

## THE MINI CREDIT - SQUEEZE

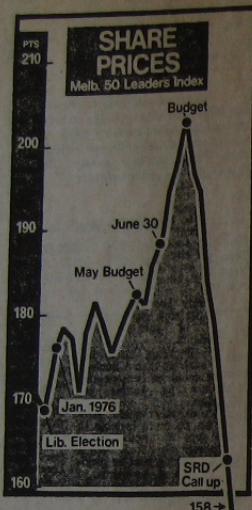
The credit squeeze announced on November 10 was the first sign that the government was nearing a crisis. And Davidson's article in the Age the next day showed that a debate was developing in the government over economic strategy.

The Treasury, true to form, was for staying on the original course.

But the government was coming under increasing pressure to change course, as this showed no signs of working. Powerful sections of business wanted to re-float the economy. A devaluation was one way to do it.

The first time around, Lynch held the line. In fact, he imposed a mild credit squeeze. This was blow to business confidence, since it made it harder to get money for investment. But he believed he had no choice.

The government had made substantial hand-outs to business early in the year. It had deferred the payment of company taxes. But instead of investing the extra money,



THIS GRAPH of the 50 leading shares index shows the full effect of the Lynch bear market, starting just after the August budget and plummeting since the new credit clampdown was announced on Sunday.

the employers used it for speculation. This was likely to fuel inflation. Much of it was being used to speculate against the dollar, increasing pressures for devaluation. To mop up this loose money, Lynch tightened credit.

But once Davidson spilled the beans, and everyone could see that the government was wavering, pressures grew still stronger for devaluation. Finally, Fraser capitulated.

## DEVALUATION — WILL IT WORK?

All other things being equal, devaluation would stimulate an economic recovery. Australian exports will be cheaper overseas, which should encourage all export

industries to expand. Imports will be dearer, which should make domestic products more competitive. Domestic producers, therefore, should be encouraged to expand. Profits should rise, and then be re-invested to finance more expansion.

Expansion should produce more jobs; the newly employed should be able to purchase more products, and round it goes. Or at least that is how it goes in the textbooks.

But all other things are not equal. There are many reasons why the present devaluation, under present conditions, may not benefit most of industry much at all. And some areas will suffer badly.

One area that will suffer is the import trade. That sector alone, however, would not be decisive. But now let's look at other areas.

To take one extreme, the building industry will gain nothing. Obviously it neither exports its product, nor does it face competition from imports. At the other end of the scale, the meat industry should normally benefit enormously, since it is an export industry. But meat quotas imposed in the USA will limit the amount it can expand.

Meanwhile, all of industry will be faced with higher costs — because devaluation will lead to a much higher inflation rate in Australia.

## HOW CAN THE GOVERNMENT REIN IN INFLATION?

The government has two alternative means available to lessen this increase in inflation, and to help out manufacturers. One is to lower tariffs. That would lessen the rise in prices of imported raw materials and components, which would help many manufacturers.

But the industries which are protected by those same tariffs will scream. Their screams ought to be ignored, since they benefitting from devaluation more than most people, but Fraser is very attached to tariff protection. He will probably resist cutting tariffs.

The second means to lessen inflation is a credit squeeze, a tougher one than before. Lynch will favour that. But if industries like the building industry are faced simultaneously with a credit squeeze and a 17 percent rise in costs, they will be sunk. And many small businesses will be caught in the same squeeze.

Of course there is also the possibility of smashing the unions, and making workers pay the whole price. Newspapers are commenting that this is the one area where the government looks like taking a firm position!

Meanwhile, one group of capitalists seem set to make a mint out of devaluation: the mineral interests. But then we always knew who Fraser's friends were, didn't we?

## SUMMARY AND PROSPECTS

The Fraser government is in serious trouble. By November it was clear that it was unable to do a better job for the ruling class than Labor had done, and was perhaps even doing worse. It had proved unable to decisively defeat the unions, or to produce business confidence. The devaluation was a desperate act by the government to restore its position. But it means abandoning its whole previous strategy. Fraser's credibility is now very low.

It is possible that the ruling class itself will get rid of the present Prime Minister in the coming months.

More dangers lurk ahead. The devaluation will send inflation through the ceiling, but may not produce any recovery — or only a short and shallow one.

Meanwhile, the recovery overseas is weak, and may collapse. If a new world recession develops before Australia begins to recover, the Australian economy would be plunged into a much worse slump.

# Industrial Scene

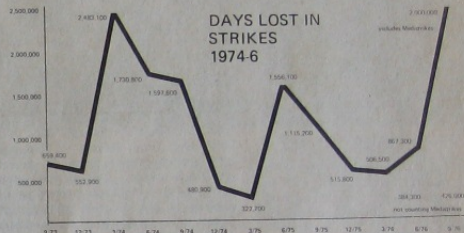
**C**lobber Fraser, or He'll Clobber Us! So read an IS banner during the Constitutional Crisis. Since then we have seen stormy

battles. It is true that most have ended in defeat, which was to be expected given right wing leadership and the high level of unemployment.

But the Australian workers, though beaten, remain unbowed. The past year has demonstrated an amazing resiliency on their part. The unions have not been decisively clobbered.

## THE RECESSION HAS LOWERED THE LEVEL OF STRIKE ACTION

Here is a graph, showing the ups and downs of the industrial struggle over two years.



Strikes reaches their height in 1974, at the peak of the economic boom. This was the year that major wage gains were made, and the period when the metal trades were leading the working class with their united national award campaign.

With the beginning of the economic downturn, the level of strikes fell off very sharply indeed, but it began to climb again during 1975 to a mid-year peak. This mid-year peak was considerably lower than the year before. This was the year of the AMWU's "guerrilla campaign" — a campaign of fragmented strikes which led to disastrous defeat for the majority of metal workers, and largely eliminated the metal trades from their position of leadership in the trade union movement.

Strike figures for 1976 follow a roughly similar pattern to 1975. There is a peak in mid-year again, higher than the year before. However, this peak is created largely by strikes over Medibank. Not counting Medibank strikes, the figures for the entire first half of 1976 are very low.

But not to count the Medibank

strikes at all would also be misleading. Undoubtedly many economic strikes were put aside during the Medibank struggle. Had the Medibank strikes not taken place, there would undoubtedly have been more normal disputes. Besides, Medibank is an economic issue itself.

Still, it is probably fair to say that there is a clear trend toward fewer strikes. That is the normal result of a recession.

The figures are not low enough, however, to provide much satisfaction for the government. Fraser was brought to power to smash the unions. So far, he has not done brilliantly.

## THE QUALITY OF STRIKES IS HIGH

What must really worry the government is the quality of the strikes. The Medibank issue produced a national strike movement around a political issue that is unprecedented in recent times. Where opportunities were given to the rank and file to have their say, as in Melbourne and Wollongong, delegates showed a tremendous understanding of the issues and a militancy to match.

The Newport dispute in Victoria is in some ways more impressive. It represents the culmination of a dogged struggle over years by militant workers, in the face of intimidation by the State government, and despite frantic efforts to sell out by bureaucrats from the rightwing to the "Communist" left.

The economic struggles of recent months have been impressive too. The Fairfax strike in Sydney has surprised the employers, unions and the strikers themselves. Nobody expected the workers to hold out for weeks on end, yet they have done so and their morale



is high. They have produced a high level of organisation, notably in the work done to gain support throughout the union movement.

In Newcastle, dockyards workers have remained unmoved by campaigns of intimidation from Canberra and sly manoeuvres by Wran. At Sydney's Qantas building site, the workers are solid after three months on strike.

The struggles appear fragmented. During the Medibank campaign, Melbourne and Wollongong remained ghettos of militancy while other centres did little. Now we find that the Newport battle has received little attention outside Victoria. Sydney seems dominated by economic struggles.

But a thread runs through all the disputes. The militants in each of them share an awareness of the reactionary intentions of the Liberal governments, of the seriousness of the recession, of the way that individual employers and the various governments are tied together into a single ruling class.

This politicisation of the working class is a national phenomenon. It is possible that the emerging crisis of the Fraser government, together with its obvious union-bashing intentions, may give next year's struggles a national character.

## THE END IS NIGH FOR WAGE INDEXATION

The Consumer Price Index for the present quarter will probably show about a 5% rise in prices. That is largely because of changes in Medibank. The courts will be under huge pressures from Fraser to grant much less. If they do what Fraser wants, it will probably force the unions to withdraw from the system.

If they don't, the following quarter will bring another blockbuster. Devaluation will have had an effect by then bringing another jump in the CPI. It is hard to imagine indexation surviving two such big increases.

Meanwhile, devaluation will mean higher profits in some industries. The employers will be scrambling to cash in and will pay wage rises rather than allow stoppages to halt production. The unions in these industries would be foolish not to return to direct collective bargaining, and abandon wage indexation.

As for other unions, the higher inflation which devaluation will bring

will make a wages push essential.

Socialists should be demanding that the unions withdraw immediately from wage indexation, and prepare for an immediate wage offensive.

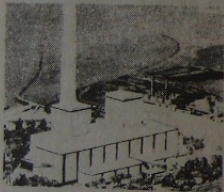
## CAN THE GOVERNMENT BE BROUGHT DOWN?

Last year, I.S. did not generally raise the call for bringing down the Fraser government. We rightly saw it as a diversion from the main issue, which was to build a strike movement over Medibank. We felt that Fraser enjoyed the united support of the ruling class, and that concept of actually bringing him down appeared utopian even to most militants.

But the government's position is now drastically weakened. Its economic strategy has failed. It is split, and the split extends into the ranks of the ruling class. Workers will feel much more confident in disputing conservative economic arguments.

Moreover, the past year has shown that the unions can bounce back over and over from defeats — that the government cannot decisively defeat the working class. This will be understood by militants throughout industry. The prospect of defeating Fraser by a long war of attrition will look much brighter.

Without engaging in ultra-left stupidities, our publications can begin to raise the prospect of destroying this government in 1977.



# Newport

Phil Griffiths writes . . . . .

THE flashpoint has passed for the moment in the struggle to stop the building of the Newport Power Station. The Union Bans are still in force, the Vital States Project Bill has

been passed and only awaits proclamation, but as yet there is no move by the Government to force the issue and provoke a massive confrontation.

Meanwhile all the forces for peace at any price are working overtime. It is a suitable moment to review the situation.

The site of the proposed Newport Power Station is a patch of swampy industrial land just 5 kilometres from the heart of downtown Melbourne. It is right on the edge of the Western Suburbs, home to 400,000 working class people and a large chunk of Melbourne's secondary industry. To build a power station there would be a serious assault on the health of the residents.

But that would be nothing new. The existing coal-fired power station of Newport is a dangerous, fuming construction, often spreading thick smoke over nearby Williamstown. Because the Western suburbs are so solidly industrial and so solidly working class, they boast a record of neglect and deprivation that would not be tolerated anywhere else.

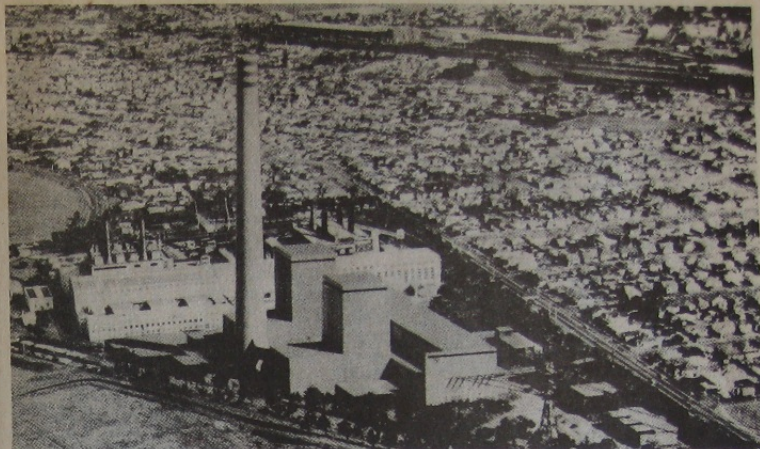
The original struggle against the power station was organised by local residents concerned about the effect it would have on the quality of the air and water in the district. By November 1972, they had managed to convince the Building and Construction Workers Federation (BLF) to place a black-ban on further work until the project was cleared by an independent inquiry.

The Victorian State Labor Party tagged behind, and finally, the Hamer Government, anxious to promote its new, trendy, co-operative image, agreed to a public hearing by the Environmental Protection Authority.

The EPA granted the SEC its licence. The hearing was a set-up from start to finish. The EPA could only consider the application in regard to the Newport site, there was no hearing on the question of alternative sites they could only examine the pollution aspect and without any agreed standards, there was a great deal of behind-the-scenes pressure from the government and shortly afterwards, the head of the EPA resigned.

The EPA licence contained a series of conditions, including one that that would close down the station every sixth day if strictly implemented.

After conservation groups had forced an appeal hearing against the decision, the government once again



organised a "safety" committee of business and government authority stooges. In upholding the EPA decision, the three committee members set their own standards for pollution levels at roughly twice the level used elsewhere. None of the three were scientists.

Then the Trade Union movement stepped in force and the Newport project was black banned by the Trades Hall Council. All work on the site stopped.

Apart from ritual denunciations by Hamer, there was little movement over Newport. The SEC continued to assume it was going ahead and let out contracts for equipment and the Trade Union movement maintained its bans, out at the same time refusing to resolve the issue once and for all. Alternative sites were proposed, but in the turmoil of 1975, the issue was lost.

But with the deepening recession and Fraser in Government in Canberra, the time seemed ripe to get rid of the ban.

In April, some frantic scenes manoeuvring saw the Trades Hall Executive offer Hamer a way out, a compromise. The capacity of the Newport would be only "half" the original level. As "The Battler" commented on 28 April, this presumably means cancer in one lung

only!

It was during this period that the present battle lines were drawn up. Using his position as Secretary of the Trades Hall Council, Ken Stone used every device possible to get the THC bans lifted.

## WEAKENED

He used the weakened industrial position of the builders labourers, a position caused by the recession and Gallaghers alliance with the bosses in smashing the NSW leadership. He used all the SEC's cynical arguments. Newport was safe, it had been passed by the EPA. Newport would allow industry the power it needed to expand and provide jobs (despite the fact that industry is contracting and cutting jobs). Newport would cost hundreds of millions of dollars, which would be passed onto the consumer through higher electricity bills. The Trade Unions want to be irresponsible citizens and not raving ideologues obstructing progress.

But Ken Stone was not alone. He had some interesting allies in the Communist Party. From as far back as April, Communist Party union officials have been pressing for compromise on Newport. And for just as long, the

of the left in Trades Hall has been able to win a majority for maintaining the bans. Tribune has repeatedly called for a "tactical reappraisal" of the situation, yet the left has kept winning. What is there to re-appraise?

During the concurrent ALP State Conference, the party's shadow minister for conservation turned around and got his committee to reverse its position to the support for Ken Stone's compromise. The conference then rubber-stamped this well-organised betrayal by the Labor machine.

Inside the Trades Hall, a large number of the rebel unions, led by the ETU and the Plumbers and Gasfitters organised to keep the bans on any work on any new power station at Newport.

When it finally came to the vote in Trades Hall, the left position won and both Stone and Halfpenny (from the CPA) were humiliated.

The Labor Party got around to again reversing its position to fall in line with the unions.

The Government kept the pressure up. Electricity tariffs were jumped around 20% and Newport was blamed. Increasing unemployment and a barrage of support in the press was wearing down support for the union position.



Ken Stone, blatantly abusing his position as THC Secretary, moved once again. More "informal meetings" of union officials were called to "reconsider" the bans. A proposal was put to the Trades Hall that it reconsider its position and renegotiate with the Government on the question of the Newport station. Two amendments were moved.

One, from the Electrical Trades, called for negotiations but ruled out completely any consideration of Newport as the site for the power station. The second amendment, moved by John Halfpenny from the AMWU and a leading member of the Communist Party, called for negotiations on the site of the station, but did not specifically exclude Newport. The intent was clear.

### VOTING

In the voting, which took place over two weeks because of a tie vote and a controversial ruling from the chair, the ETU amendment was carried by 4 votes with every delegate attending for the first time in history. The Communist Party voted for the ETU amendment while undermining it with its own compromise proposals.

During all this, the State Labor Party tried once again to influence the outcome. The Parliamentary caucus voted to support Ken Stone's call for negotiations and reconsideration.

Needless to say, with Hamer's threats of union bashing Legislation recently announced, the subsequent state conference (heavily attended by union officials) voted unanimously to correct this attempted sabotage. Once again the utter irrelevance of the ALP was underlined and once again the parliamentarians were humiliated in their pathetic attempts to compromise and sellout.

Hamer went berserk. Having negotiated several "agreements" with a highly wide-ranging and severe union-bashing legislation in memory. It was so primitive, that the Government itself had to amend it in the Upper House. Nevertheless, it still prescribes penalties of \$50,000 for organisations boycotting projects named as "Vital".

This netherland call immediately, if temporarily, united the Trade Union movement. There was a lot of rhetoric flowing about how we might have disagreed on Newport, but this is different.

But there was no action to match

the rhetoric. And neither could there have been because the VSP Bill and Newport are inextricably linked. Hamer, or at least the Bolte-line conservatives in his Cabinet, would like this legislation anyway. Newport has given them the cover to introduce it. Hamer wants Newport built. He is prepared to use this as a stick to beat the unions.

In the end, the only way to smash the VSP Bill is to deliver a decisive defeat on the Government over Newport. If the Newport ban stays, the Bill will exist in name only. The unions will feel in a position to smash it, and any threatened application of it, at will.



John Halfpenny

The relationship between Newport and the VSP Bill means that unless there is an immediate threat to some specific official, the unions will remain divided over the VSP Bill as well. Stone regards it as another weapon in arguing for Newport. The left unions are avoiding calling a shop stewards rally because they fear that the stewards would vote for the building of Newport under the Government's conditions. Not only that, but there are elections in the AMWU and there are a lot of worried CPA officials at the moment. Unfortunately, this ignores the impact a show of strength would have on the Government and incorrectly suggests that leading stewards are overall against the union bans. They're not. If they were, the unions would have heard about it by now.

In the meantime, the THC has taken up the call for an inquiry into the site of the power station. An amendment that called for no inquiry that allowed discussion of Newport as

a possible site was defeated, meaning that the THC is calling for an inquiry that might still decide to build Newport. Just where that leaves Trades Hall policy is unclear.

Once again, the Communist Party and the AMWU officials played a key role in defeating the amendment, moved at Trades Hall by Furnishing Trades Secretary Ken Carr.

In fact, when it came to discussing the issue late, Carr was attacked for "breaking the unity" of the left caucus in Trades Hall. Apparently, the left caucus had voted to support the inquiry call and a similar amendment had been beaten in caucus.

But on Newport, talk of left unity is utopian, and in fact dangerous. The left is split and no amount of compromising and chest beating will change that, for the moment. One group in the left unions is pushing very hard the line of compromise, at the same time as maintaining a paper opposition to Newport. These unions are holding back the other half of the left that seems more prepared to actually fight. The task is to unite these unions around the existing bans and further action. That kind of unity would be of some value.

This split in the Rebel Unions is more complicated than the voting of their leaders. There has been a significant wave of disgust amongst members of the rebel unions and especially the AMWU, at the line the AMWU officials have been pushing. There is also a huge split inside the Communist Party, with some members voting against Halfpenny on the floor of Trades Hall and in other union meetings. Certainly, there is a thinly-disguised hostility to the policies of the Victorian branch amongst CPA members in other states.

### NEEDED

What's needed now is for unions who have remained consistently militant on this issue to assert their independent position on Newport, to commonly declare that their bans will stay, inquiry or no inquiry, because talk will not make Newport safe.

The current situation also highlights the reactions of some of our most important leaders when confronting the powers that be. The Rebel Unions and the industrial/political machine around John Halfpenny of the AMWU are two of the most

important formations in Victorian politics.

Since November last year, there have been three great struggles in Victoria against the Governments. The first was the Constitutional Crisis, and the attempt by workers in Victoria to organise for a General Strike. The Battler and the Age have already documented the role of the Communist Party in containing that upsurge.

The second was the struggle over Medibank, when once again, Communist Party officials used their machine in the unions to hold back the struggle in order to achieve some mythical unity with the right. On that occasion, the rank and file ignored them and the CP was forced to move sharply to the left for fear of losing their base. It is significant that Hawke had to call a General strike to quell the upsurge over Medibank and he needed the co-operation of the left unions (who refused to call rallies on the strike day) to defuse the situation.

### WANTING

Newport is the third great struggle and it could be Waterloo, or perhaps more accurately, FORD, for John Halfpenny.

It was Laurie Carmichael's role in selling out the Ford struggle in 1975 that shattered his militant image. He was quickly shoved upstairs into national AMWU office. Halfpenny was then furiously promoted as his successor. But how long can he hold on now?

Three times out of three in the past year, the Communist Party have been tested and found wanting. Rank and file militants will not be prepared to endure that kind of performance for much longer. The only way, however, that they will get any kind of defence against the Liberal Governments and the effects of the recession is by organising themselves to act independently of the timid left.

Building that kind of rank and file, grass roots organisation is one of the tasks of the I.S.

# WOMEN IN THE METAL TRADES

by Janey Stone

“TO DEVELOP Trade Union consciousness among women can be difficult, but not as difficult as it may first appear. . . the employment of a large number of women in our industry is a relatively new development in this country.”

JOE GOSS, a South Australian official of the Amalgamated Engineering Union and later of the Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union, wrote these words about 1969 or 1970. He was a very experienced trade unionist who came to Australia in the early 1930's, yet he appears to know little about the real history of women in the metal trades and the relevant unions. Perhaps this article can contribute to greater knowledge and understanding for trade unionists.



## WOMEN ENTER THE METAL TRADES — EARLY 20th CENTURY

Women have always provided a lot of factory labour. In fact in 1927, about half of all factory workers in Australia were women, and in Victoria they were 65%. In the early part of the century, women were concentrated in the traditional areas — clothing, textiles, shoes, food preserving; but already in the 1920's they were beginning to move into metal and engineering.

How they were employed on "light repetitive work" such as core-making, nut and bolt making, and drilling, lapping and assembling.

Right from the beginning the craft unions resisted the introduction of women. The Amalgamated Engineering Union, for instance:

*"During the last war (in Britain) when women entered the metal trades in large numbers... engineers were inclined to regard the situation as abnormal and transitory, whilst the prevailing low rates of women's work did not conduce to their acceptance as fellow Unionists."*<sup>9</sup>

This appears at first glance to be outright sexism. One would almost think that the union believed that women deliberately asked for low wages in order to avoid having to unionise!

But I will try to show that such statements and attitudes aren't simple sex prejudice, the response of sensitive male egos. Mostly the male unionists' reactions to the introduction of female labour were also tied up with genuine traditional union principles. Often these principles were the narrow views of craft unionism. Sometimes the unions' attitude was conditioned by their limited aims in a social crisis they didn't understand — as in the depression.

On the other hand, when unions appeared to be taking a principled stand for women, it was often for ulterior motives. For instance, during the 30's the Australian metal unions became advocates of equal pay. The main reason was that they were trying to protect their (male) members' existing jobs, and believed that the main reason employers hired women was because they were cheaper.

The inter-weaving of traditional union principles and attitudes with sexism is a pattern that can be followed right through the history of women in the metal trades.

Here is an early case. In 1925, H.V. McKay (predecessor of Massey Ferguson) in Sunshine, Vic. employed girls on what had been boys' work. The men in other sections threatened to strike, and negotiations between unions and employers dragged on for two years. The employers agreed to equal pay, yet the unions (AEU and Agricultural Implement Workers) continue to object. Eventually the women were accepted following the recommendations of an all-women committee representing both sides.

At first glance this would appear to be a simple case of sexism — the men just didn't want women on the job. But an account by the factory superintendent reveals clearly what the important issues were:

JANEY STONE is an AMWU Shop Steward at the STC plant in Alexandria, NSW. She has participated in Womens Liberation and socialist movements for a number of years. She is the author of a number of articles and pamphlets on women's issues and the womens' movement, including an analysis of Radical Feminism.

*"On one occasion when the boys who were employed left in a fury over some trivial matter, I gained the consent of the directors to experiment with girls on the machine. The result was apparent almost at once. We got an increase of 62% in output within the first few days of operating the machines and the girls adapted themselves to the conditions immediately."*<sup>14</sup>

The investigating committee made some wage comparison:

	15yrs	18yrs	21plus
<b>MALE RATE</b>	25/-	44/-	91/9
<b>Average female earnings for full week of 48 hours on piece work.</b>	33/9	56/9	98/11

What are the issues here? The boys were clearly on strike and the girls were scabbing. The girls knew nothing about the established pace of work and accepted speedup — production was 62% higher, but piecework didn't bring 62% higher wages.

And most importantly, the management had taken the opportunity to introduce piecework, which has always (rightly) been resisted by unions in the metal industry.

No wonder the men resisted the introduction of women, and nominal equal pay wasn't enough to buy them off.

In the events at McKays, the girls themselves appear to have been completely passive, pawns in the hands of the unions and the company. But that wasn't always the case. Sometimes women stood up and fought for themselves. When that happened prejudice was often discarded, and the men followed their lead.

In 1924, women workers at Metal Manufacturers, Port Kembla, went out on strike. The company had tried to speed up production, making them work 5 or 6 spindles instead of the usual 4, without any increase in their pay — which was about half the men's.

*"This eventually raised a protest from the girls, and a refusal to work more than the original four spindles. The dismissing of one of the girls who refused to work the extra long spindles brought about an immediate stoppage, all the girls leaving the works with the girl dismissed."*<sup>15</sup>

The men in the rest of the factory struck in sympathy.

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Women continued to gradually move into the metal trades during the 30's, but the main influx came during the war. Between 1930 and 1941, 94,000 women moved into

the workforce<sup>16</sup> the majority of them going into metal and munitions. Women in the metal, machinery and vehicle industry rose from 1375 in 1933 to 52,847 in 1943<sup>17</sup> and by 1945 they were 13% of all workers in the industry.<sup>18</sup>

Of course the main reason was the massive increase in demand for war equipment and munitions, coupled with the large numbers of men leaving industry to go into the armed forces. But the movement of women into industry was also associated with other changes.

The war period was one of restructuring and rationalisation of industry. New technology, increased need for precision and greater specialization meant big changes in factories. Conveyor belt flow systems became much more common, and there was marked increase in numbers of semi-skilled metal workers.

These changes were, from the employers' point of view, suited to employment of women. And they were eminently suited to the introduction of piecework in many areas.

Piecework was made possible by a regulation covering the Women's Employment Board. Set up in 1942, the WEB was intended to set wages for women doing work which had previously been done by men, or which was new work. It had to set wages on the basis of

Two women employed in the munitions works, Footscray, (Vic) during the Second World War



*"the efficiency of females in the performance of the work and any other special factors which may be likely to affect the productivity of their work in relation to that of males"*<sup>19</sup>

The words "efficiency" and "productivity" opened the door to piecework.

The employers, led by the Metal Trades Employer's Association, fought hard against the board and its decisions. They took out a writ against it in the High Court, used delaying tactics at its hearings, and frequently just refused to pay the higher wages.

In the metal trades, the WEB mostly awarded women 90% of the male wage after a probationary period on a lower wage. The employers did everything they could to get the WEB to decide on less. (When there was disagreement on the board, usually the employers' representatives wanted to pay less and the trade unionists more.)<sup>20</sup>

They argued that women needed more supervision, and had lower productivity due to lesser strength and greater absenteeism. Jobs were changed so that women weren't quite doing the full work of men. In other cases the job was broken down, so that it entailed less responsibility. While greatly desiring the female labour, the



employers had to constantly downgrade it. This same uneasy mixture is shown in the WEB statements:

"We draw attention to the position that if females claim equality of pay with males, they must be prepared to accept equality in other matters as well, and for the most part women accept this position."<sup>11</sup>

Yet the women concerned in this application were then given only 80% of the male rate. And here is a second case:

"The evidence is that the woman has done practically the whole of the work of an oiler and greaser and has been prevented from doing the full amount of work by reason of some restrictions that the employers think fit to impose upon her, possibly out of regard for a feeling that she might not be capable of climbing a high ladder. She says she is able to do it and we have no doubt she is capable of doing it. We think she should not be prevented from earning the full award rate."<sup>12</sup>

She was awarded 90%.

Although the WEB rarely awarded 100% of the male rate, there is plenty of evidence that women were often actually of greater value to the employers. For instance Judge Foster, chairman of the WEB, commented that

"in some cases, particularly on monotonous labour, managers have said that the women worked better. Women were invariably better "where the job required unlimited patience, light touch dexterity and thoroughness."

This was of course explained away as women's nature. An article released by the US Office of War Information almost satirizes (unintentionally) the exploitation of women's "natural" abilities:

"At the Lockheed-Vega aircraft factories on the West Coast of the US, women are working side by side with the men. A department foreman declared, 'In every task in which there are no physical factors — such as physically parts to move — women are as good as men,'

"Physical factors are often decisive however. Centuries of sewing and needlework have given women a natural finger dexterity and a phenomenal resistance to monotonous repetition which stand them in good stead now. At the exact techniques requires both precision and speed, their fine touch and keen eyesight are invaluable.

"These same faculties have given women exceptional advantages over men in such factory jobs as cutting and soldering of wires, assembling motors (etc.) . . .

"Mass production has subdivided many of the phases of aircraft work into small repetitive operations, and at these women have another natural advantage. Patience, which is proverbially a women's virtue, fits them for monotonous small work which leaves men workers exhausted from sheer boredom. Women can continue a single small operation hour after hour without losing their efficiency of their interest.

"This same natural advantage of women, incidentally, often reacts as an advantage for men workers. When replaced by women in the monotonous jobs along the production line, men can go on to the departments offering heavier and more varied tasks. In this way, women have accelerated production, and have brought about an upgrading of men workers that would not otherwise have been possible."<sup>14</sup>

Now let's take a closer look at a couple of the metal unions during this period. The Amalgamated Engineering Union and the Sheet Metal Workers' Union provide an interesting comparison.



Women in British Industry, World War I

## THE AEU

The Australian AEU was a branch of the British union until 1968. It is an old union with well established traditions. Engineers were always very craft-conscious, proud of their skills and standards of work.

The AEU was an elite among metal unions, wealthy, and before World War II provided many non-industrial benefits such as insurance against loss of tools, accidents, sickness and unemployment. "To the tendency to create an aristocracy of labour was added, therefore, the fastidiousness of an insurance company."<sup>15</sup> AEU members were nicknamed "Gentlemen Jims" and "Tin Gods".

Unskilled worker members gradually grew in numbers throughout the 20th Century, but remained a minority. T. Sheridan, the historian of the AEU, says "there is no doubt that the AEU remained predominantly a craft union right to the end of its separate existence in 1972."

The AEU's attitude to women in the industry and women members once they were admitted was conditioned by its own limited craft union approach, and its basic outlook which remained unchanged throughout the last 50 years of its existence in Australia. Sheridan explains:

"As with all other unions, the AEU's *raison d'être* was to guard and improve its members' conditions of work. Within the policy structure erected on that premise the major influence was the fear of unemployment . . .

Their long experience of the cruel trade cycle naturally made them hesitate for a considerable period before finally accepting that the 1940's had ushered in a new era of full employment. Most engineers' doubts disappeared only in the late 1950's and their long conditioning has continued to call forth most of the old automatic reflexes into the seventies."<sup>16</sup>

I would add that one of the "old automatic reflexes" is opposition to women. In other words, opposition to women wasn't pure sexism, but was usually tied up with the basic policies of the union.

During World War I, the AEU in Britain had experienced a lot of trouble with a rapid influx of engineers who hadn't had the long training usually necessary to do tradesmen's work. In World War II, (i.e. AEU was determined to have more control over these "dilutees") It negotiated with the government very early on and an agreement allowing (male) dilution was reached in 1940. The ARU's policy in the early 1940's was

"designed for the immediate and future safeguarding of

its own membership, whose economic interests constitute the primary concern of the organisation. Second preference in employment was to be given to men unemployed through war conditions, and thirdly the employment of women was approved provided that they be paid the male rate for the job. If and when normal conditions return it was assumed that the reverse order would prevail in discharges from the industry in line with the time-honoured practice of last on first off, taking it for granted that this represented a natural order of priority in industrial status."<sup>17</sup>

If you make sure that women are last on, you can rely on union tradition to make sure they're first off.

The increasing numbers of women in the industry in the early 40's created a terrible dilemma for the union. They were opposed to women being there, but a union must face facts. They couldn't be admitted to the union, but the existence of a lot of unorganized workers weakens the union's position. The union couldn't negotiate for them, but in order to protect their members' own wages they had to ensure equal pay.

So while the union officials were negotiating with the government, there were many stoppages on the shop floor over equal pay. And from 1940, there was mounting pressure from the rank and file up through the union structure to change the rules and admit women.<sup>18</sup>

For instance engineers at Fords, Homebush (in Sydney) struck for three weeks in late 1942 over women employed on first class welding and there was a similar dispute at ACI Engineering in Sydney. The strikes provided pressure for the unions' negotiations, and in the end regulations were gazetted in May, 1943 providing for equal pay on tradesmen's or second class machinists' pay, and male journeymen were given preference over women. The pay question being settled (from the men's point of view), the AEU became thereafter less concerned with the problem of female wages.

The struggle in the union to admit women is a classic story of rank and file pressure on conservative officials. Resistance to women existed on the shop floor, of course, especially among tradesmen. The AEU fought hard to prevent women being employed even as second or third class machinists, while the toolroom was "a strictly male preserve".

Yet on the shop floor resistance was a matter of emotional reaction, not principle as it seems to have been among the officials. And there were many pressures pushing the men to accept women.

The resistance to dilution meant that the AEU members had to fill the extra demand for labour as much as possible themselves, by working very long hours. One Melbourne organiser commented that efforts were made to "supplement the 44 hour week with as much overtime as the human form can stand."<sup>19</sup> The union was unable to take care of its members' interests in this situation, because of its commitment to resisting dilution. Not only couldn't they look after their members' health, they couldn't even use overtime bans as a tactical weapon. For instance, the Commonwealth Council refused in early 1941 to be associated with an FIA overtime ban as part of a campaign against new tax provisions. In the end the government was forced to intervene and limit hours to 56 per week.

This situation, together with the increasing numbers of unorganisable women on the shop floor, meant the ranks of unorganisable women on the shop floor. In Britain, exerted pressure for the admission of women. In fact, for instance, AEU shop stewards helped organise women

into other unions.<sup>20</sup>

In Australia by 1940, organizers (who are close to the shop floor) were putting pressure on the Commonwealth Council<sup>21</sup> Commonwealth Council's answer was made on principle: under no circumstances would it agree to the entry of women into the skilled trades. By April, 1941 the Commonwealth Council was forced to communicate with the Executive Committee in Britain for permission to organise females "for our own protection".

London refused, but the district officials kept up the pressure in Australia. Eventually an international ballot was taken in July, 1942 but bureaucratic holdups meant women weren't admitted until April, 1943. Once women were admitted, the AEU moved quickly "to unionise women workers in the real sense of the word."<sup>22</sup>

Women were quickly joined up and Muriel Heagney, a well known woman trade union activist, was appointed organiser of the women's section. A pamphlet was put out in May, 1943 aimed at helping organize women, and providing them with arguments to use against any hostile male members. Women shop stewards were elected, and their first meeting was held in November, 1943 in Sydney.

## THE SHEET METAL WORKERS' UNION<sup>23</sup>

The SMWU was in many ways very different from the AEU. Before the Second World War it was much smaller and poorer. It didn't even start producing a printed newsheet until December 1936. Its first car and employer for its first typist in 1940. The union was small enough for deaths of individual members to be reported in the newsheet. It wasn't until 1938 that sheet metal working was recognised as an apprenticeship trade, after many years of agitation.

There always were a small number of women working in sheet metal, particularly canister-making (for tinned foods), but before the war only some States made any effort to organize them. For instance in 1938, the S.A. branch recruited some women doing enamelling, but the NSW branch doesn't appear to have recruited any before the war, although there were eligible women. This is in spite of the fact that, as a small union trying to grow, they were constantly on the look-out for new members.

As in other sections of the metal industry, the SMWU had to cope with a massive influx of women in the first years of the war. Although the union accepted women in the industry and as members, it was still very much matter of women being all right as long as they knew their place. The 1940 Federal Conference passed a motion "that branches guard against the introduction of female labour do work other than on which they were engaged at the time of the 1930 award being made."

In December, 1941 the question of female labour was "a burning one" in SA "Members must make up their minds as to the conditions under which they are prepared to tolerate this class of labor."

In other words, the union was mainly concerned with the interests of its male members. Like the AEU, it looked to the future of their jobs after the war. It regarded the presence of large numbers of women as temporary. And, also like the AEU, it continued to struggle to keep women out of new areas of the industry. For instance, when firms in SA asked the union to agree to women doing soldering, it refused.

Finally in April, 1942 the union started to make an all out effort to organize women. An article in the newsheet



told the membership:

*"It is more necessary than ever that they be recruited to the unions. Already the Ironworkers Union has thousands of female members and the ASE has commenced to organize others."*

*Shop stewards of the SMWU where female labour is employed, must immediately organize them into our union, where they will receive the protection of our organization and be able to play their part in the struggle to maintain and improve conditions."*

The final straw seems to have been the sight of all those potential members going into the Ironworkers and the ASE!

Women shop stewards were appointed. In 1943 two conferences were held and a women's committee elected. Miss Doris Beely became Women's Organizer. And the issue of equal pay became a major one for the unions.

Before the establishment of the WEB, the union actually managed to get full equal pay for women members in munitions factories working on presses, soldering, drilling and assembling. They also managed in several cases to get equal pay for junior females, but were unable to get employers in general to apply it to adult women.

When the WEB started functioning, the SMWU changed its orientation slightly. The General Secretary through the Women's Employment Act was "the most revolutionary legislation enacted for many years." The SMWU made more applications to the WEB than any other union. When the WEB made a common ruling of 90% in the metal trades, the union concentrated on implementation of it, rather than pushing for the full equal pay. (Of course they continued to talk about the need for full equal pay and made applications.)

The campaign seems to have been quite impressive. Along with court action, the union asserted its belief in shop floor action. "We urge all members to keep up continuous agitation in their shops to secure improved conditions." And there certainly were a lot of industrial disputes and strikes, as well as in the next section.

But the SMWU's policy on the war was one of full support, and their continual pushing of the battle for production must have tended to counteract their support for industrial action over equal pay.

The first women's shop stewards meeting in 1943 pledged itself to "avoid stoppages of work, which can only be harmful to the war effort." Shop floor action, when it occurred, had to be justified by convoluted arguments:

*"Workers... who get decent wages and conditions are going to be more efficient than those working under a sense of injustice."*

The second women's conference, in 1943, passed resolutions on:

*"100% unionism among women, closer cooperation between men and women workers in the workshops, carrying out of the union's policy of full support for the war, with particular attention to combating absenteeism and lateness to ensure increased production."*

This schizophrenia meant that they supported workers when they went out, but still tried to get them back as quick as possible. For instance in a dispute in a South Australian munitions factory, the union recommended a return to work the basis of the management proposing "to confer with representatives of the unions involved and place the cards on the table."

## THE IDEOLOGICAL BATTLE

For the working class, the war period meant an ideological battle. All of society's institutions were lined up behind the war effort, and workers who wanted to do up behind their wages or conditions had to overcome something about their wages or conditions had to overcome incredible pressure. The leadership of most trade unions capitulated to the propaganda, and supported the "battle for production".

The FIA for instance had a position formally similar to the Sheet Metal Workers. In practice they campaigned harder against strikes, and when they did break out, they support from the union was almost non-existent. They argued the need for "increased discipline" to deal with the "larrakin element" on the waterfront:

*"We should not wait for the boss to sack these people, but we should sack them ourselves if they are not prepared to mend their ways and pull their full weight in the struggle against fascism."<sup>24</sup>*

The AEU never gave up the right to strike, although the Commonwealth Council was sometimes "perturbed" when it strikes took place before informing officials.<sup>25</sup>

The main propaganda tool used to manipulate women was of course, "natural" femininity. In the early part of the war women's main role was thrust in the home. The Australian Women's Weekly<sup>26</sup> was in the forefront:

*"Look natural! is the motto today. Obvious makeup is a thing of the past... The girls... who hoards cosmetics... is plainly speaking a traitor (!) to her country, to other women and to her true self."*

Austerity propaganda went to ridiculous lengths: an advertisement in the Women's Weekly in 1942 said:

*"Yes - Betty's Handing Her Vegemite to the Troops! It seems strange doesn't it, but every jar of vegemite you or your children go without actually helps our war effort. You see, our troops need Vegemite and plenty of it!"*

In 1942, the emphasis in the Women's Weekly changed to encourage women to go out to work. "Australia is calling on her women as never before."

The change in the magazine was certainly not unassociated with two of its top management, Frank Packer and Edward Theodore being appointed to the Allied Council, a body created to help solve manpower problems.

While it became more oriented to factory women, the Women's Weekly still emphasized femininity:

*"Working hard at the factory all day, I haven't time for elaborate beauty treatments. But I've found the right care for my skin - Lux Toilet Soap."*

*"When doing our job on munitions we don't neglect our appearance - but still keep our feminine charm by always having our Escapade Lipstick with us."*

Judge Foster of the WEB comments on their wonderful dedication:

*"Hats off to these women! No one who has not seen them can possibly appreciate how great is their contribution to the war effort."<sup>27</sup>*

We gave an example of the ideal woman:

*"In one factory I saw a girl who had come straight from a beauty parlour. She was doing work that was dirty and hard on the hands. On being told that she had not long been married, I asked her where her husband was, and she said on a northern battle station. When she was asked how she found the work after a*

*beauty parlour, she said she liked it much better. I asked her why, and she answered, 'It's much more interesting and besides - I'm making cartridges for my husband to fire.'"*

Thrifty at home, hard-working and uncomplaining - was this a true picture of the war-time woman? A hint that not all women were so pliable comes in a comment from an American personnel expert at Lockheed-Vega:

*"Most of our department heads prefer women between 25 and 35, married and above all, they prefer widows with children to support. We also give preference to the wives of soldiers and sailors."<sup>28</sup>*

A look at the actual industrial record of women during the war makes it clear that women were among the leadership of the working class.

## THE MILITANCY OF WOMEN WORKERS

Of course men were involved in strikes during the war, particularly miners. But in the metal industry the war meant a dramatic change. Although wages were frozen, for men they were at a much higher level than during the depression. This was due to increased overaward payments, great increases in overtime at penalty rates, and "war loadings". For instance, Sydney newspapers were advertising for toolmakers at \$24 a week (not including overtime) when the current award was \$13.10. At this time an adult woman in the metal trades with 12 months experience received \$7.20. A girl under 16 got \$2.25. Because of the contrast, and because it was just handed to them, the men were reasonably satisfied. When they were involved in struggles they tended to be defensive ones, trying to protect themselves against the new women workers. Moreover, men with a tradition of unionism behind them were more tied into the official union structures. They were more inclined to follow the policies of the union leadership and accept support for the war effort.

The situation for women was quite different. Moving from housework or work in beauty parlours into "important" work for the first time they gained new confidence.

Work for women were not only low - the wage situation was also quite chaotic.

At the beginning of the war, private industry was paying women the traditional 54% of the male rate. The Department of Munitions, under an agreement with the unions, paid 62% in its factories. In the 1942 Metal Trades Award, women with less than 3 months experience were awarded 65% and those with more, 75%. The WEB set rates for women in new jobs and in what had been men's work. In the metal trades this was mostly 90%. Women doing tradesmen's work were paid 100%.

In some workshops, women were paid two or three different rates for essentially the same work. In other cases, the company simply refused to pay the WEB rate (90%) and continued paying the lower rate of the Metal Trades Award. Even government factories did this. In one example, the AEU had to intervene and the workers received back pay totalling about \$60,000.<sup>29</sup>

Industrial action, short stoppages and strikes were frequent. Over and over again it is clear that the women were militant and wanted to fight, but every often the government or the unions sent them back to work after a short time, with empty promises or part gains.

It was strikes of women workers at two private munitions factories in 1942 which led to the setting up of the WEB.<sup>30</sup> Many sheetmetal factories such as Malleys in Sydney and other workplaces such as the Small Arms Factory at had already achieved full equal pay.

Between 1943 and 1945 Muriel Heagney, Women's Organizer for the AEU, reported many instances in her log. In one dispute, "girls on the benches threatened reduction in output on benches of 60% of the male output, unless rates were equalised."<sup>31</sup>

Queensland munitions workers were sometimes given 24 hours notice to go to work in canneries at much lower pay. These women were hostile, and according to the Ironworkers' paper Labour News, were being "kept at work with difficulty."

In 1944, women at Bulima Cannery struck. A meeting of the unions was called - after they had already gone out. The unions appealed to the workers that, during this war, striking was only "a last resort". The women returned to work in return for negotiations which resulted in only a small gain: as increase of \$1.60 on their wage of \$6 for that season only, and after that a drop back to \$6.50.<sup>32</sup>

When employers refused, to pay the WEB rates as awarded, and used all sorts of delaying tactics, it was often only the strength of the workers that could enforce the decision. At Kenvenagh and English in Sydney, women sheet metal workers struck for over 5 weeks. The Trades and Labour Council had to be brought in, and with 100% solidarity the strike was won. The Sheet Metal Worker reports that "there was widespread interest and support through the trade, and voluntary collections were made to supplement relief."<sup>33</sup>

At Simmonds Aerocessories in Melbourne, 132 women sheetmetal workers went on strike for over 4 months, supported by 150 engineers. The case went to the High Court but in the end the company gave in.

The union supported the stand of the women, but tried to prevent the strike. (The board of the union) had no other course but to support the women in their decision to cease work... The officials of the branch endeavoured along with the shop committee, to try to come to satisfactory arrangements with the company to avoid any cessation of work."<sup>34</sup>

At AWA in Ashfield (Sydney) the company refused to pay the \$10 granted by the WEB, and kept women on \$7.20. One hundred and fifty women and girls in the aircraft assembly section joined the AEU, and the union took the issue up. When the WEB Committee of Reference arbitrarily decided that only 75% of them were entitled to the WEB rate, there followed a three week strike. Eventually the women were "prevailed upon" to return to work in return for the government undertaking legal proceedings.<sup>35</sup> We are not told who did the prevailing, but we are left with a clear impression that the women workers were quite prepared to stay out longer.

The company of Richard Hughes (Sydney) refused to pay WEB rates for its women workers. The union (SMWU) concentrated on the courts, and the case dragged on for over 6 months. Each time the decision was given in favour of the union, the company appealed to another body with the full backing of the MTEA. It eventually became obvious to the women that they were getting nowhere. In June, 1944 the 28 women doing the work which was involved in the test case went on strike, and the company locked out the rest of the employees, over 300. Direct action proved successful, and quick, and the settlement



meant \$6000 in back pay.<sup>36</sup>

A first hand account of the atmosphere in a workshop during a strike meeting is given by Jessie Street<sup>37</sup> a well known feminist of the time, who worked in a munitions factory in Footscray (Melbourne) under another name. The women there had been awarded 90%. The women called a stopwork meeting, which was addressed by the (male) union secretary of the FIA. He assured them they would get their money and urged them to return to work, "as the boys in the trenches. . . ." At this the women became even more angry and shouted at the secretary: "We know all about the boys in the trenches," "they're our husbands and sons." A very militant meeting led to a strike. When Evatt sent them a telegram saying he'd "bring pressure to bear" if they went back to work, the response was riotous. Finally Evatt agreed to pay the difference until the matter was settled, and the women returned to work.

During the war, women workers were in the forefront of militant action throughout industry. For example, the 1944 printing strike in Sydney sparked off by women and girls at the Sun<sup>38</sup>

In the more traditional areas of work, women felt they were doing work as important as those who replaced them, they were often more experienced and skilled, yet their wages were much lower. In 1941 Sydney textile workers struck in opposition to their all-male leadership — in August 2500 came out, and in September 9000 were out for two weeks<sup>39</sup>

## EXODUS — THE END OF THE WAR

Right from the beginning of the war people were wondering what the post-war period would bring. In 1943, when women had just been admitted to the AEU, women in the metal trades were "questioning what their fate will be."<sup>40</sup>

The metal unions generally declared themselves officially as out to defend the interests of their women members.

At the first AEU women's shop stewards' meeting, the Sydney District Secretary assured women that they were now full and equal members of the union. The rule change that had taken place in the engineering industry, involving increasing use of women's labour, apart altogether from the exigencies of a war economy.<sup>41</sup>

He hoped the conference would lay the foundation for adequate consideration of the "special problems of women in relation to war and post war industry."

The SMWU in 1943 condemned those who sought to create divisions among workers when it came to jobs. "We must remain united. Not preference for one against another, but work or full maintenance for all must be our slogan for the post war period."<sup>42</sup>

And yet after the war, women left industry as fast as they had entered. Between 1945 and 1946, women dropped from 13% to 8% of the workforce in metal, machines and vehicles.<sup>43</sup>

Why did they leave? Of course many must have found the thought of returning to the home attractive, after the hardships of the war period. But it is also true that all social institutions united in sending them back to the home.

Trade union officials joined in whole-heartedly. C. McGrath, Federal Secretary of the Printing Industry Employees Union, had reminded women as early as 1943

not to forget their true place while temporarily at work.

*"What is that place? Women should know. Queen Elizabeth, in a recent broadcast, proudly claimed that "in a hundred ways, women have filled the places of men who have gone to fight. After the war they would be called upon as homemakers to play a great part in rebuilding family life."*

*Lady Gowrie spoke to servicewomen recently, and is reported as saying: "We do not want our service women to become hard-faced and tough. After the war we want them to remain women and set up homes just as they would have done had there been no war."*

*A woman employed on the trams shows a nice appreciation of things when saying: "My husband, who was a tram-guard, is now in the Middle East. I want equal pay so that he can get his job back when he comes home."*

*An English woman making munitions said this: "I think that the more of these shells I get into the machine, the sooner Jack will come home from Libya. And then I think the more of these shells I handle the more money we'll have to start a home with."*<sup>44</sup>

Naturally, not all trade union officials were as bad as this. Nonetheless, most men would have believed that it was in the natural order of things that women should leave when they were "no longer needed" at the end of the war.

The SMWU, which had been so vehement over women workers' right to equal pay and decent conditions, signed an agreement with AWA in 1944 over postwar retrenchments. Preference was to be given to men and boys — particularly where the women were on the (higher) WEB rates<sup>45</sup>. In February, 1945 the SMWU's newsheet published a cartoon showing a woman in overalls watching her husband shave. "Jealous?" he says. The SMWU still had a large female membership at this stage — in 1946 it was still 15%, though it had already dropped.

The Small Arms Factory in Lithgow, owned by the Department of Munitions, lost all their women workers after the war. In 1947, they wanted to reemploy women, and an agreement was reached with the unions, ASE, AEU and FIA.<sup>46</sup> The agreement was never implemented because sufficient male labour was found, but it is worth looking at all the same. Women were to get full equal pay, and the unions insisted on several conditions for hiring. Some of them are:

- 1 All male labour available shall be absorbed.
- 2 Local ex-employee blind males shall be given full consideration.
- 3 Females dependent upon our energies for livelihood shall be first eligible applicants.
- 4 Married women with no children shall be considered as second eligible applicants.

A detailed order of retrenchments was drawn up:

- (a) It is agreed that all female employees in manufacturing sections shall be retrenched before any male employee
- (b) Agreed that married females with children (subject to clause (c))
- (c) That married women not dependent on own energies shall be the second line of retrenchment
- (d) That after clauses (b) and (c) have been implemented female labour will be retrenched an first come, last to go basis"

This extraordinary document is probably an extreme example. Nonetheless, it's interesting that these men went

way beyond simply protecting their jobs and tried to distinguish between different categories of women.

There were, in this period, incidents of a quite different sort, where men stood up for women's right to work. Jessie Street describes an example of a Sydney factory, where 8 women remained after the war, still on men threatened to strike. When the company then dismissed the women, saying it would employ only males, the men struck until the women were reinstated.<sup>47</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The most important fact to emerge from this history is that women in the metal industry have had periods of great militancy. Women are prepared to fight, even when the whole of society, including their own union leadership, is lined up against them.

The question that arises is why, with this militancy, the women allowed themselves to be sent back into the home so easily. It is because militancy in itself is not enough. The lack of a trade union tradition was one thing that allowed women to see through some of the war propaganda. This was a strength. But there was also a weakness — the lack of permanent organization which good trade union organization on the shop floor brings.

The unions to a certain extent realized this problem. Often they refer to the need to unionize women in the "true sense of the word". But very little was done to build on going organization among women workers, either by unions or by women themselves.

This is probably because almost everyone seems to have believed that the existence of large numbers of women in the industry was temporary. Even those women who wanted to stay in it themselves probably looked at it as a personal decision. Almost certainly they believed that in general women would leave industry.

Today, things are different. Women are in industry to stay, and most people know it. Today there is a possibility of building shop floor organization among women. I intend to take this subject up in a future article.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AMWU	Amalgamated Metal Workers Union
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
FIA	Federated Ironworkers Association
SMWU	Sheet Metal Working Industrial Union (sometimes abbreviated SMWU)
ASE	Australian Society of Engineers
MTEA	Metal Trades Employers Association
WEB	Women's Employment Board

## FOOTNOTES

This article is intended to provide a background to an understanding of women in the AMWU today. For that reason I have concentrated on the unions that went to make up the AMWU. Of those, before amalgamation women made up a small percentage of the membership for the AEU, but 20% of the AMWU, while the Boiler-makers and Blacksmiths had no women members. The ASWU were themselves the result of amalgamation of three unions — the Victorian Agricultural Implement Makers' Union the NSW Stovemakers' Union, and

the Sheet Metal Working Industrial Union.

Of course I have given information on women in other sections of the metal industry. There clearly is and was a fair amount of interchange of unskilled workers between the different metal unions. Also, the Munitions and Metal Workers' Union was important and influential during the war. After the war it amalgamated with the FIA, but by then it had shrunk a great deal.

My most detailed union information is from the AEU. "Mindful Militants" by T. Sheridan is a very convenient source. I have some a certain amount of reading in the journal of the SMWU, but I have made no effort to seek primary sources for the FIA. The other important union in the metal industry about which I've said little, is the SHU.

In any case, in many of the shop floor struggles, it isn't possible to say which union was involved.

- 2 Edna Ryan and Anne Conlon, "Gentle Invaders", p. 112
- 3 "Women in the Engineering Industry", pamphlet, AEU, May, 1943, p. 4.
- 4 Ibid., p. 16
- 5 "Workers Weekly", no. 57, 25-7-24
- 6 Penny Ryan and Tim Rouse, "Women, Arbitration and the Family", in *Women at Work*, p. 23
- 7 Constance Larmour, "Women's Wages and the WEB", in *Women at Work*, p. 55
- 8 Ryan and Rouse, op. cit., p. 16
- 9 A. W. Foster, "The Experience of the Women's Employment Board in Australia", in "International Labour Review" Vol. 52 p. 636
- 10 Larmour, op. cit., p. 53
- 11 Ryan and Conlon, op. cit., p. 129 (my emphasis)
- 12 Ibid., p. 129 (my emphasis)
- 13 quoted in Larmour, op. cit., p. 51
- 14 "Women in the Engineering Industry", p. 19 (my emphasis)
- 15 T. Sheridan, *Mindful Militants*, p. 13
- 16 Ibid., p. 52
- 17 "Women in the Engineering Industry", p. 5
- 18 Sheridan, op. cit., p. 163
- 19 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 152
- 20 James Jeffreys, *The Story of the Engineers*, p. 260
- 21 Sheridan, op. cit., p. 160, gives the full story
- 22 "Women in the Engineering Industry", inside front cover
- 23 All the information in this section comes from "The Sheet Metal Worker" newsheet of the SMWU. Anyone wanting the source for a particular reference is welcome to write to me c/o this magazine.
- 24 E. Thornton, "Trade Unions and the War", Federal Council of the FIA, 1942, p. 20 (my emphasis)
- 25 Sheridan, op. cit., p. 148
- 26 Andree Wright, "The Women's Weekly: Depression and the War Years", in "Refractory Girl", no. 3, p. 9. All quotes from the *Women's Weekly* are from this source.
- 27 Larmour, op. cit., p. 51
- 28 "Women in the Engineering Industry", p. 20
- 29 Muriel Heagney, "Women in the Engineering Industry" article in "The 25th Anniversary of the AEU", Australia, 1945, p. 34 (Not to be confused with an AEU pamphlet of the same name)
- 30 J. Hutson, "Six Wage Concepts", p. 114
- 31 Ryan and Rouse, op. cit., p. 25
- 32 Ryan and Conlon, op. cit., p. 133
- 33 "The Sheet Metal Worker", no. 40, June 1943
- 34 "The Sheet Metal Worker", no. 40, June 1943; no. 42, 1943; no. 45, April, 1944
- 35 Heagney, op. cit., p. 53
- 36 "The Sheet Metal Worker", no. 44, February, 1944; no. 45, April, 1945; no. 47, August, 1945; no. 48, October, 1945
- 37 Jessie Street, "Truth or Repose", p. 216-220
- 38 James Hagan, "Craft Power", in *Strikes*, p. 174
- 39 Peter Spearrint, "Women in Sydney Factories, 1920-50", in *Women at Work*, p. 45
- 40 "Women in the Engineering Industry", p. 7
- 41 Heagney, op. cit., p. 53
- 42 "The Sheet Metal Worker", no. 39, April, 1943.
- 43 Ryan and Rouse, op. cit., p. 16
- 44 Ibid., p. 28
- 45 Ibid., p. 27
- 46 This agreement is in the research files in the AMWU office in Sydney
- 47 Street, op. cit., p. 124



The first Right to Work March, 4000 strong, marches into London.



PAGE 18

The Right to Work Campaign was launched in Britain twelve months ago. It did not appear to be an ideal time: Labour government had been power for some two years, and their "Social Contract" had meant the lowest level of industrial disputes for many years. Politically the situation was oppressively stagnant.

However, three factors suggested that the campaign could be a success. Firstly, it had begun to sink in throughout Britain that there would be long-term high unemployment. It was an issue that would be around for some years. Secondly, because of the increase in unemployment and the continued erosion of workers' living standards was taking place under Labour, there would be a growing number of workers looking for means to fight back independently of their official leaders. Obviously this could not be done entirely inside the official trade union movement, which was working hand in glove with the Government. Finally, a foundation for the campaign already existed in the trade union bodies and individual militants associated with the National Rank and File Movement.

The NRFEM took the initiative in launching the Right to Work Campaign, with the first major national focus to be a march of employed workers from Liverpool to London.

The central aim of the campaign was to unite employed and unemployed in the fight. Harry McShane, who was Secretary of the Scottish Unemployed Workers' movement during the Depression, and now supporting the Right to Work campaign said:

*"There was resistance (to unemployment) in the 30's and a great deal of courage was shown, in those struggles. But there were weaknesses of which we were aware.*

*"Our greatest was our failure to secure the support of the workers still in employment in the fight against unemployment. This is something that the National Right to Work Campaign must overcome."*

Consequently, in the 10 basic demands of the campaign, there is a very strong emphasis on what those who have industrial power, the employed, can do to help the unemployed.

The role of the unemployed was to be different from that of the Thirties, too. This time it was not to be silent, suffering and passive marches like the Jarrow Crusades. The unemployed were angry, and their energy was to be used to show that anger, and in organising to get unions and factory committees to take up their case.

For example: it was one thing to have, say, one shop steward trying to get the stewards' committee to stop overtime working and fight for taking on more employees instead. It was another if there was a picket of fifty or one hundred unemployed from the local Right to Work Campaign making a fuss outside the meeting or picketing the gate. Unemployment became a human reality then, not just a news bulletin or statistics.

#### THE ROLE OF THE REFORMISTS

There are three distinct approaches to unemployment in the British Labour Movement.

There is the right wing of the Labour Party, including such erstwhile left wingers as Michael Foot. They describe the situation as shocking, tragic, very tragic or extremely

## THE DEMANDS

OPPOSITION to all forms of redundancy. No voluntary redundancy, no job loss through 'natural' wastage. No productivity deating.

FOR 100 per cent trade union closed shops with shopfloor trade union control of hiring and manning levels. No discrimination or blacklisting. Trade union district registration of all jobs and protection of district manning levels.

NO CO-OPERATION with the employers — no to all participation schemes.

UNCOMPROMISING opposition to all forms of racialism and discrimination. For the equal right of women to a full time job.

FOR the 35 hour week without loss of pay. For official overtime bans to force more jobs.

FIVE days' work or five days' pay. For occupations to force the nationalisation without compensation of firms that cannot guarantee the right to work.

STOP the cuts

BREAK the freeze, for across the board increases to protect living standards.

FULL wages for the unemployed and no means testing. \$12 a week increase now for all unemployed workers as an immediate step towards this.

FOR full trade union rights for the unemployed.

# The Right To Work Campaign

by Doug McCarty

tragic (depending on whether the figures have gone up or not), and do nothing else. The vast majority of union leaders behave similarly, making greater or lesser noise, but still doing nothing. Obviously they cannot, because to do something would be to threaten their Labour Government — which, as long as it stays in office, and a soon as the economic situation will permit, is going to pass all kinds of marvelous legislation.

Secondly, the "Broad Left" elements — left-wing Labour and the Communist Party — appear and sound more aggressive. But they are living with a contradiction. For some years they have been pointing to the left-wingers in the union leadership (in particular Hugh Scanlon of the AUEW and Jack Jones of the TGWU) as those who are carrying out the struggle in the highest levels, and so deserving of full support. Now however, these "left" officials have moved well to the right and are fully behind the Labour Government's attack on wages, living standards and its acceptance of high unemployment.

For the Broad Left to organise effectively against unemployment would bring them into conflict with Scanlon, Jones, and their ilk. But to do nothing would alienate their own supporters in the rank and file of the unions. Their answer is the "Stage Army" campaign.

In this style of campaign a prominent "official" Trade

Union body calls a conference, or lobby of Parliament, or a demonstration. Prominent union leaders and "left" politicians are invited as key speakers, to say how angry they are. A long resolution condemning the Government is passed. Their "stage army" of rank and file trade unionists turn up to vote, or march, or lobby, and then exit stage right until they are summoned once again.

These initiatives are welcome, but nothing happens between the events. There is no real organisation for the campaign. And up to the time I left Britain in October, there had been several of these events organised by the "Assembly on Unemployment" and the "Liasion Committee in Defence of Trade Unions" — but the unemployed had not been invited to any of them.

#### THE RANK AND FILE APPROACH

The Right To Work Campaign, by contrast, is based first and foremost on the self-activity of the rank and file workers involved in it. It is not just a question of getting shop stewards' committees to carry resolutions, but to see what they can do to force their own employer to do something about unemployment. Similarly, the unemployed must see what they themselves can do locally







a group of well-meaning teachers tried to use "anti-authoritarian", "child-centred" methods, only to wind up with the same old mess: a hierarchy within the classroom. Those the teacher liked were at the top, those who displeased the teacher were at the bottom.

The reason is the pressures of the surrounding society. There can be no socialism in one classroom.

Sharp finishes up with a discussion of what to do about schools. Her proposals are more or less limited to passive study:

*"a process of self-education... the setting up of study, reading and discussion groups among teachers which can...*

*sensitize educators... and provide a basis for a reorientation of the knowledge component of what is transmitted in schools. On the other hand it can serve as a foundation for a commonly shared, systematic and coherent world view...*

She devotes one sentence to the "need for an activist struggle", but hastens to warn of the dangers of hasty action — then returns to theoretical questions.

That will not be much encouragement to teachers and students, who are confronted first and foremost with the need to struggle. Putting off the struggle until they have achieved a profound theoretical clarity is a luxury they can hardly afford.

Teacher and student activists who are to be "exposed to a critical analysis of the whole structure of bourgeois hegemony" can hardly be expected to take it seriously unless it is developed out of, and in conjunction with, on-going struggle.

Marx wrote that "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs." That is also true of a dozen study groups, for the study groups cannot live without real movement.

This question appears to be the subject of some debate within the Radical Education Group, which produces the magazine. It would be well if that debate also took up the style of writing. Sharp's

penetrating analysis is hidden behind a byzantine prose. What is a teacher, frazzled after a hard day, to make of paragraphs like this:

*"These teachers share the dilemmas of most educators. They are moralists and utopians who inadequately comprehend the economic, social and political preconditions for the goals they profess. Their view of freedom is individualistic, voluntaristic and psychologistic, involving a romantic idealization of the child. The perspective they adhere to is not socially situated, or located within an analysis of how individual actions and activities occur within a social context...."*

And so on, and on. Alas, one of the dilemmas of educators is that radicals haven't written many readable articles on education. If the RED magazine can improve its style to match its content, it could fill that gap very well.

Tom O'Lincoln

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with the heart: Man to  
command and Woman to  
obey: else confusion.  
Man for the field and Woman  
for the hearth: Man for the  
sword and for the needle  
she: Man with the head  
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Man to command and  
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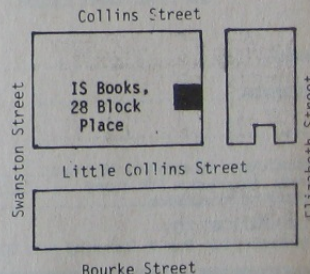
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