Organising and representing women: the historical case of the Female Confectioners Union

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Increasing women’s representation in trade unions and their participation in leadership positions is a key objective for trade unions, with the recent International Trade Union Confederation’s (ITUC) 1st World Women’s Conference in October 2009 including a forum on women as decision makers and a panel exploring young women’s voice in their union. In the accompanying discussion guide, women’s committees are identified as a critical strategy in strengthening women’s voice in their unions (ITUC/CSI/IGB 2009, 41). The continuing significance of women’s committees in ITUC, in global and national peak unions and individual unions reinforces the role of separate organising by women to advance their interests, and raise and sustain their voice in their unions.

Separate organising has long been adopted as a strategy by both women workers and trade unions, and it has taken many forms from women’s committees to women’s unions (Briskin 1999, Cobble 1990, Parker 2002). In this paper, the historical use of separate organising is examined through the case of women workers in the confectionery industry in the Australian state of Victoria and the Female Confectioners Union, the union they formed in the mid 1910s and supported until the mid 1940s. For the Female Confectioners Union, separate organising became a contested organising strategy and they were faced with ongoing inter-organisational conflict with the men’s union. Using archival research, in particular the records of the Female Confectioners, and drawing on the industrial relations and labour history literature on separate organising, the paper explores two questions. Firstly, how did the nature and impact of the conflict with the men’s union affect the women’s union, its leaders and the membership? Secondly, how should the interests of the women be represented and their voices sustained?

Female confectionery workers were just one of many women workers whose union organising was influenced by the use of separate organising in Victoria in the 1910s to promote the organising of women workers. Women organised themselves or were organised by others (including men) into women-only unions in a number of occupations including the clothing trades (garment making, dressmaking, shirt and collar work, whitework), waitressing, office cleaning, laundering, bookbinding, and cigarette making. Existing unions with large numbers of women members such as the Rubber Workers, Clerks and Tobacco Workers formed women’s sections. This organising effort demonstrated that women not only were organisable but actively engaged in organising activities (Yates 2006).

The commitment to separate organising by female confectionery workers was clearly expressed. A Confectioners union had formed in 1888 but heightened concern over the parlous state of women’s wages was the impetus for the organising of a separate women’s union in 1916. When the Female Confectioners Union faced internal difficulties in 1918, the women responded by winding up the union and forming another separate women’s union, rather than joining with the male union. While the relationship with the male union would continue to be a difficult one, other men played critical supportive roles. Although his behaviour brought about the demise of the first union, Isaac Johnston was instrumental in the union’s initial formation. Its re-formation was assisted by the male leadership of the Victorian Trades Hall Council which provided the second secretary, Harry Smith, who would lead the
union for the next decade. Support was also forthcoming from a major employer, Macpherson Robertson who entered into a closed shop agreement with the union in 1919. As with all the women’s unions, the union relied on the willingness of the women members to take on a myriad of leadership roles. Alongside the male secretaries were women as presidents, vice presidents, organisers, assistant secretaries, trustees, committee members and shop stewards: and many of these were young women. Margaret Wearne was 24 years old when she became the union’s first federal secretary in 1918. Assistant secretary from 1919, she became Victorian secretary after Smith’s death after which the branch had an all-woman leadership group.

The case of the Female Confectioners is one about representation and who could best represent the interests of the female workers. It was formed when competing views about representation were being debated: for closer unionism and amalgamation, industrial unionism and the One Big Union. Like the craft unions which were being encouraged to join together to create industry-based unions, the Female Confectioners Union, organised along occupational and gender lines, faced increasing pressure to amalgamate with the male union. Despite their in-principle support for the idea of closer unionism and the One Big Union, the reality was a hostile male union. Although the industry was dominated by women workers, the male union was unwilling to recognise the right of the newly organised Female Confectioners to represent its members. While other women’s unions amalgamated with their male union counterparts from 1915-22, by the early 1920s, the only remaining women’s union was the Female Confectioners. Nonetheless, there were persistent attempts to agree with the men’s union on terms of an amalgamation throughout the 1920s. The stumbling block was always the Female Confectioners’ insistence on control over their own sectional interests through sectional representation in the union leadership and decision-making structures and the male union’s refusal to concede to this. These debates over separate organising as divisive sectionalism or as an important avenue for representation and voice were ongoing, with an amalgamation not achieved until 1945.

Examination of this experience of separate organising will add to our understanding of the challenges and debates it engendered historically. The lessons drawn from this case will also inform and contribute to current debates about the organising of women workers, and avenues for representation and voice for women in their unions.

References


