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


Conference Theme: Assessing the response for collective actors to wider changes at work and in their societies and the impact of different representative systems on their ability to respond to those issues.

Female Pattern Resistance in the Service Industry: The Impact of Social Dialogue and Action on Union Organizing

The paper explores how females in the service industry in one large Midwestern hotel resist exploitation in the workplace through social dialogue and social activism via three avenues: worker/worker, worker/management, and worker/community. This exploration focuses on the way female housekeepers negotiate their work environment with other workers, management, and the broader community to overcome barriers to organizing. By providing a forum in which workers can share their stories about barriers to union organization, the researcher empowers workers, experts in their fields, to talk about their perceptions of ease or difficulty in achieving union recognition. This “insider” approach allows the hotel workers to generate solutions to barriers associated with union organizing not apparent to “outsiders,” such as management or researchers. The solutions they generate comprise an “action plan” which, when implemented, may overcome barriers to union organization and serves as a blueprint for further organizing.

Participants for this study are thirty-one housekeepers in one large Midwestern major hotel chain who are attempting to form a union through UNITE-HERE. These workers, who receive little pay and no benefits, are building a network of fellow workers inside the hotel and community activists outside the hotel who are sympathetic to their plight. Focus groups were formed to elicit dialogue from the housekeepers about the barriers to organizing they faced, their desire for a better standard of living, and their wish for dignity and respect in the workplace. Dialogues were noted by the researcher who asked probing questions during the focus sessions which resulted in emerging research questions. An analysis of the collected data revealed themes of resistance utilized by female housekeepers which allowed them to negotiate and mediate their work environment while simultaneously attempting to organize.

The study is situated in Grounded Action Research Theory (Simmons & Gregory, 2003) which explores and informs complex organizational and social problems and issues. Beginning with no a priori notions, this inductive research method, known as the explanatory theory of action, allows research questions and action problems to evolve from collected data. The explanatory theory of action is drawn from Participatory Grounded Theory which explores collaborations between outsiders (management, researchers) and insiders (individual workers) in an environment to develop a “local theory” of participative research and empowers insiders to inform practices within their workplace environment. Participatory Grounded Theory is used as a starting point from which evolving research questions and data emerge. The explanatory theory then informs an operational theory of action, a rationale and model of action which theoretically predicts outcomes. Implementing, reflecting on, and evaluating this plan of action allow adjustments to the suggested policies to be made.
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Union identities in post-industrial and post-crisis society: evidence from the UK

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Union identities in post-industrial and post-crisis society: evidence from the UK

The late 1990s and early 2000s provoked an upswing in enthusiasm and confidence in the prospects for union renewal and revitalisation in the UK and beyond amongst both the academic and practitioner communities (for an overview, see the edited collections by Gall 2003 and 2006). After more than a decade of sustained investment and engagement in a range of strategies, the UK union movement is entering what seems likely to be a lengthy period of significantly higher unemployment and lower economic growth. Evidence from previous recessions suggests that this combination of events is likely to present unions with a far more challenging external context than has been experienced since the start of the long boom from the mid-1990s to the financial crisis on 2008-9 (Gallie et al 1996). Thus, it is a logical point at which to assess the efforts of unions during the 15 year period of steady employment growth, low inflation and very low unemployment.

The paper takes as a basic assumption Hyman’s view that solidarity and the expression of collective interests is, and always has been, a socially constructed process demanding a vision of the end purpose of such activity. He explicitly acknowledges the process of social construction of ‘working class interests’ and the important role that trade unions have always played in this (Hyman 1997, 1999). He argues that the notion of worker interests rests on “imagined solidarities” (1999; 94) which have traditionally privileged the interests of one group of workers (skilled, white, male, full-time, manual workers) above others (unskilled, ethnic minority, women, atypical and service workers). But because he stresses the extent to which “through their own internal processes of communication, discussion and debate – the ‘mobilization of bias’ – unions can help shape workers’ own definitions of their individual and collective interests” (1999; 96), he is relatively optimistic that unions can therefore “re-imagine” interests and, specifically, notions of solidarity, to reflect the diverse interests of a changing workforce and membership. The contemporary challenge is, therefore, to construct union identities that respond to the changing context of work, employment and society; specifically post-industrial labour issues and the challenge of the recent recession.

This paper uses data from a longitudinal study of union organising activity starting in 1996 and continuing to the present. Over that time, interviews have been conducted with hundreds of key decision makers, officers, and other key actors throughout the trade union movement. This data reveals information and analysis relating not just to union organising activity, but also to other renewal strategies and ideas. Periods of observation have been undertaken at peak level and within individual unions and campaigns. Documentary evidence such as policy documents, position papers etc. have been collected and analysed. Used as an empirical source alongside published debates and evidence relating to alternative strategies and initiatives, this enables us to assess ideas and initiatives relating to renewal within union movement since the mid-1990s.
The central argument is that union renewal initiatives in the UK have given very little attention to changed social identities and the complexity of identity in post-industrial society. I argue that the post-crisis socio-economic context is likely to present even more profound challenges. However, using Hyman’s typology of union identities (1994, 2001), it is evident that this failure is not inevitable. Not only is possible in theory for unions to “re-imagine solidarities” (Hyman 1999), evidence from organising campaigns (Simms 2007) shows that unions are capable of framing and giving voice to collective interests in a post-industrial context and that there remains a demand for collective representation on employment relations issues from both workers and, to some degree, from managers. Using the framework of identities proposed by Hyman (1994, 2001), the paper examines five initiatives within UK union renewal efforts (greenfield organising, legal mobilisation, union modernisation projects, union learning initiatives, partnership policies) to comment on the underlying views and assumptions about the future of collective union representation. The discussion focuses on the UK context, but may have relevance beyond.

The paper extends previous analysis which has examined these ideas in relation to organising activity (Simms 2009) by comparing the notions of union identity underpinning competing renewal strategies. It argues that different renewal initiatives draw on contrasting – and often conflicting - underlying notions of the processes involved in and the consequences of building (framing) collective interest and solidarity. Of particular relevance for this conference, the paper also identifies the very different underlying ideas of what we can infer about the perceived purpose of such activity in creating competing visions of a renewed (or renewing!) trade union movement. The paper argues that some of these visions of what trade unionism is ‘for’ (i.e. the purpose of collective solidarity between workers organised and expressed through the formal institution of a trade union) are more feasible and relevant than others in the post-industrial and post-crisis context.

This paper has not previously been presented for discussion or publication.

References
‘Keep Your Head High’: Adaptations and Struggles of Australian Women Miners
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Our paper reports on the changing situation of women miners over the last three decades and the adaptations and struggles they experience. It is based on qualitative interviews of 22 of these women mining workers recorded between 2006 and 2009. The first handful of women began working in Queensland coal mines in 1979, as labourers, in what was seen by some as a public relations exercise rather than a genuine willingness to embrace equal opportunity. Working in the mines can be a real source of economic liberation for women, probably the best method for those not seeking university educations, provided the debt trap can be avoided. But in pursuing that goal, they face many challenges of adaptation and struggle.

First, they must deal with the domestic sphere, often managing significant domestic responsibilities while working full-time – what Baxter et al (1990) call the ‘double burden’ of paid and unpaid work. Second, they must deal with issues in the productive sphere. Some of these issues relate to their efficiency – and visibility – at work. They must demonstrate themselves to be highly capable, reliable workers, often under a microscope of far greater scrutiny than their male counterparts. Other issues in the productive sphere arise from their conditions of work – achieving job security, obtaining training, developing career paths, and standing up for their rights as workers, including through engagement with labour unions. Third, they must deal with divisive issues or ‘frictions’ arising from social constructions of their gender and sexuality. This includes sometimes defending themselves against harassment, overcoming old prejudices about the role of women from supervisors and workers, and confronting the sexual insecurity of fellow women outside the mines. Fourth, to successfully stand up for their rights as workers, women need to build up solidarities with their fellow workers. This means managing the public view of their social identities so that their gender is not seen as excluding them from the class and occupational identities of their male co-workers. It means developing networks of support, with each other, with male co-workers, and with the union. None of that is easy, as there are many barriers along the way facing women. But for all the hardships, the women love the work and the rewards it brings. As women’s employment increases, adaptations become more favourable, and women begin to approach the numbers that enable them to more effectively force adaptations onto others and go beyond the point of being what Kanter (1977) refers to as a ‘token’ group.

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