Organising and Representing Women: the Historical Case of the Female Confectioners Union

Cathy Brigden
RMIT University

Introduction

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 use of separate organising by women to advance their interests, and raise and sustain their voice in their unions.

In this paper, the representation of female workers is examined through the historical 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. The Female Confectioners Union is an example of how the use of separate organising as an organising strategy contoured the shape of women’s union representation and provided avenues for women’s participation (Briskin 1999, Cobble 1990, Parker 2002). Female confectionery workers were among those 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 (Brigden 2007). This organising effort demonstrated that women not only were organisable but actively engaged in organising activities (Yates 2006).
For the Female Confectioners Union, separate organising became a contested organising strategy with the union facing ongoing inter-organisational conflict with the other union in the confectionery industry, the Confectioners’ Union (hereafter referred to as the men’s union) Using archival research, in particular the records of the Female Confectioners, and informed by 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 in its first decade and a half? Secondly, how should the interests of the women be represented and their voice sustained?

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. Apart from Barton’s (2001) analysis of the union’s activities in Tasmania and an honours thesis on the union during the 1930s depression (McCaig n.d. c197-) there has been limited analysis of the union, despite its longevity as the only women’s union in Victoria after 1922. As a consequence this examination aims to begin redressing the gap in the literature identified by Broadbent and Ford’s (2008b: 6) in which there ‘is very little literature available which analyses the industrial and political impact of the early women-only unions’.

**Forming (and reforming) the union**

Unionisation in the Victorian confectionery trade dates back to the 1880s when a union was formed to protect the interests of the predominantly male workers. This early dominance of the industry by men, however, did not last with women increasingly employed as mechanisation reduced the degree of labour intensity of the work. It is estimated that, by the turn of the century, the number of female employees was similar to that of men, and less than two decades later, there were twice as many women and girls as men and boys (Robertson, 2004). The men’s union oversaw these significant shifts in the gender profile of the industry. Reference to a ‘Women’s Branch of the Confectionery Trade’ is found in the minutes of the 1911 Eight Hours Anniversary Committee, but there is no further mention of that or any other women’s branch at that committee (Eight Hours Anniversary Committee, 1911). By 1916, Mr Geddes had been secretary of the Confectioners’ Union (hereafter referred to as the men’s union) for 27 years.

The formation of the Female Confectioners Union was comparatively late with most of the other women’s unions in this period organised in 1908-1911. Heightened concern over the parlous
state of women’s wages underpinned the desire for separate representation of women confectionery workers’ interests. Despite the mechanisation that had so decisively reshaped the gender patterns of employment, the women’s work was tedious and repetitive (Robertson, 2004: 124). Although there were some benevolent employers like MacRobertson’s, concerns about the women’s working conditions prompted a proposal in 1917 for a royal commission into the sweating of women in the confectionery trade being flagged at a Victorian Trades Hall Council (THC) meeting as well as complaints to the Minister for Labour about the very low wages and poor conditions (THC Council minutes, 28 June 1917; The Argus 4 October 1917: 4).

In Victoria, wages and conditions were set by Wage Determinations, the outcome of meetings of Wages Boards. The industry-specific Boards comprised an equal number of representatives of the employees and employers plus a chairman, appointed by the state government. Members of the board debated and voted on the terms and conditions of employment, with the chairman having a casting vote. The five employee representatives on the Confectioners Wages Board were members of the men’s union and the Storemen and Packers Union, and were all men.

In September 1916, forty seven female confectioners met at the Temperance Hall to hear about the ‘serious’ effect of the 1914 Confectioners determination. Leading the meeting was Isaac Johnston, who encouraged them to do three things — form a union, affiliate with the state peak labour council, the THC, and seek registration in the federal industrial relations system — so a court case could be taken ‘where some measure of justice would be given’. This advice was to later prove critical for the young union. In the chair was Isabella Parker, who submitted a list with 116 names of potential members. Parker was then elected president together with Ruby Stewart (vice president), Johnston (secretary) and Jean McLaren (treasurer). Six committee members were elected. It was not unusual to have a male outsider in the key leadership role, with male leaders in a number of other unions at the time (for instance, the Cigarette Workers and initially the Female Hotel and Caterers Union). Apart from Johnston, however, all of the office holders were women (Meeting of female confectioners, 26 September 1916). At the union meeting a week later, workplace organising and industrial strategy were discussed. Organising was to be led by Parker, who was appointed organiser and the first shop stewards were appointed. Again these were all women: nine women at four firms (MacRobertson’s, Hoadley’s, Allans, and Long and Smiths). Johnston reported he had initiated the process for a review of the determination, requesting the Minister of Labour refer the matter of the Confectioners determination to the Court of Industrial Appeal (Victorian sub-branch meeting, 3 October 1916).
Arguing for ‘equal pay’, the Female Confectioners sought support from the other unions and the Wages Board employee representatives in the attempt to vary the 1914 determination.

Tensions soon developed over representation on the Wages Board. Indeed this would remain a point of contention between the unions in the confectionery trade. The men’s union, with less than 200 members, was quickly outnumbered by the women’s union, which had more than 400 members at the end of 1916 and 900 a year later. A rather patronising view of the capacity of the women was articulated by Geddes who argued his union should get three of the five delegates: ‘it would be fair, as the girls could not or was not [sic] equal to the task on a Wages Board and we would be able to do justice to all sides’. Johnston’s view was Geddes ‘wants justice for both sides but not enough justice for the Girls’ and indicated they would challenge the representation (Victorian sub-branch committee meeting 11 December 1916). This proved unnecessary when the Minister of Labour appointed two Wages Board representatives for each of the two unions plus one for the Storeman and Packers. Such recognition from the Minister of the appropriateness of the Female Confectioners representing the women workers would continue in subsequent disputes over union representation on the Wages Board.

The Female Confectioners then lodged an appeal with the Court of Industrial Appeals to vary the 1914 determination (Victorian sub-branch committee meeting 4 March 1917). Although there had been disagreement between the confectionery unions over industrial strategy, the plight of the women workers led to support from other unions, with 18 donations from £10 to 10/6 listed in the minutes in June 1917. The Wharf Labourers donated £62-10-0 ‘to assist the girls in their fight for better conditions (Victorian sub-branch committee meeting 11 June, 6 August 1917).

As well as attracting women and girls as members, the union records also show women willing to take on a variety of roles in the union. This creation of a base of union activists mirrored similar developments in other women’s unions (Brigden 2007). Having a male secretary did not lead to a lack of willing members wanting to participate in running the union. Contested elections show active involvement of members and a desire to shape the union. In 1917, the presidency was contested, while the treasurer’s position was contested the following year. Amongst the early activists was Margaret Wearne, who became a member on 3 October 1916 and on the union membership list in the December 1916 minutes (as ‘Maggie’ Wearne). Then aged 23, she worked at MacRobertson’s (Damousi 2002: 509). In 1918, while she successfully contested the election for trustee, it took two attempts before she was elected vice president.
A fracture within the leadership group led to internal conflict in late 1917 and a challenge to Johnston. Although unsuccessful, it was a portent of more serious allegations against Johnston, leading to an investigation by the THC. Much of 1918 was dominated by accusations against Johnston of impropriety, obstructive behaviour and a damaging leadership style. The membership finally agreed with the THC that the union be dissolved and a new organisation formed. There was concrete support from the THC, which asked E.H.A (Harry) Smith to assist the women. Smith, an experienced union organiser, gained the support of the members and was elected secretary in June (Meeting of Female Confectioners Union, 24 June 1918).

The change of leadership and industrial strategy brought immediate benefits. Under Smith, the union engaged in direct negotiations with employers and agreement was reached regarding union right of entry and appointment of a shop president at MacRobertson’s, union recognition, agreed dispute resolution processes and a means for managing piecework changes with the Victorian Manufacturing Confectioners Association (Executive committee special meeting, 1 July 1918). Six months later, a closed shop agreement was reached with MacRobertson’s. After 13 January 1919, union membership became a condition of employment for new employees with the shop president present when girls were engaged (General Meeting, 20 January 1919). The depth of membership support for the union’s strategy was underlined by a vote held over a proposed agreement in 1919. With the terms of the agreement challenged by the other unions as being overly influenced by the employers, more than 700 members voted in support of the leadership (with 12 against and 6 informal) (General Meeting, 31 March 1919).

The union continued to grow, becoming entitled to a third THC delegate in 1919. An additional office-bearing role was created in late 1918. Previously a trustee and vice president, Margaret Wearne was appointed assistant secretary. Her role was to ‘visit and look after the interests of all those girls who were sick or in distress and needed assistance’, with it also being ‘vitally necessary that someone should be in constant touch with the members and to generally act as an Inspector of the Factories’ (Management Committee, 16 December 1918, 13 January 1919).

**Conflict with the men’s union**

The Female Confectioners Union was formed when competing views about representation were being debated: for closer unionism and amalgamation, industrial unionism and the One Big Union (THC Council minutes, 7 September 1911, 28 August 1919). 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 men’s union. Despite their in-principle support for the idea of closer unionism and the One Big Union, the reality was a hostile men’s union. Although women workers dominated the industry, the men’s 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 men’s union’s refusal to concede to this. These debates over separate organising as either divisive sectionalism or as an important avenue for female representation and voice were ongoing, with an amalgamation not achieved until 1945.

Coloured by conflict from the outset, the Wages Board continued as the site of ongoing inter-organisational disputes. In 1919, the men’s union delegates voted with the employers against increasing both adult and juvenile female wages rates (Confectioners Wages Board minutes, 19 June 1919). The following year, tension was already apparent when, in protest over how the union officers were treated, Margaret Wearne and Elsie Hood, two of the Wages Board delegates, refused to attend a meeting in 1920. What could only be seen as deliberate provocation by the men’s union then set the scene for ongoing conflict (Management Committee, 8 March, 19 April 1920). The men’s union chose Isaac Johnston as one of their wages board delegates. Predictably, this angered the Female Confectioners (Management Committee, 3 May 1920). Not only were his ‘past actions’ felt to be objectionable but he had attended a meeting of the employer association, had a partnership in a firm and had dismissed an employee. The women refused to sit with him, walking out of a meeting of the unions that he tried to attend (General Meeting, 10 May 1920, Management Committee, 17 May 1920). The matter festered, with Johnston resigning and then re-elected, so it was thought, because he ‘did dominate the men’s union for the time being’. The Female Confectioners decided to nominate an additional delegate, a strategy that proved successful with all three of their nominations accepted by the Minister for Labour, with Mr Wooten from the men’s union and Beardsworth (Meeting of Victorian branch 19 July 1920). This did not resolve the conflict with the men’s union continuing to press the Female Confectioners to withdraw their third delegate and allow them a second delegate (Management Committee, 15 November 1920, General Meeting, 13 December, Management Committee, 20 December 1920).
In 1921, ongoing conflict and rancour at the Wages Board over the 44 hour week campaign and the timing of a new determination (which led to a THC inquiry) further fuelled animosity between the unions (Management Committee, 28 November 1921, 23 January 1922). A demarcation between the men’s union and the Storemen and Packers in 1925 affected the women’s representation on the Wages Board. Again the men challenged the women’s legitimacy. Smith was ‘determined not to give consideration to the women, and desired to continue the friction and distrust that existed between the sections’ with ‘a minority having majority representation’ completely unacceptable (Management Committee, 8 March 1926). This impasse led to the Board not meeting again until 1931.

Both unions pursued other industrial strategies. For the Female Confectioners, direct negotiations with the Management Committee again proved advantageous (Federal Council 5 June, 9 June 1920; Special General Meeting, 2 July 1920). Less successful was the men’s union’s attempt to secure greater organisational control. An application to the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration (Arbitration Court) for federal registration of a union to cover both men and women was rejected by the Registrar, who found that the members could ‘conveniently belong’ to the Female Confectioners Union (Federal Council 28 August 1920, Management Committee, 8 November 1920). Ironically, it had been Johnston’s initial advice to gain federal registration that protected the Female Confectioners against this move to curtail their capacity to represent women workers.

A women’s union or One Big Union?

From its inception, amalgamation was a matter of debate and action for the Female Confectioners. As indicated earlier, the Female Confectioners was formed in the midst of debates over the One Big Union and the merits of industrial compared to craft unionism. In principle, the union were open to discussions about one union in the confectionery industry and willing to engage in discussions about amalgamation. What was critical, however, was the ongoing perception that a degree of gender-based or sectional representation was necessary to protect the women members’ interests. The union first articulated the position it would steadfastly maintain in 1916: ‘that it would be most advisable to retain our officers as we have as women workers been neglected in the past’ (Victorian sub-branch minutes, 6 November 1916). Despite Johnston’s support for one union in the industry, he also argued for Isabella Parker’s retention as organiser because of the ‘neglect of organisation of women workers’ (Conference of unions 20 November 1916). For all the rhetoric around closer organisation, the
actions of the men’s union were often quite contrary. There was little attempt at building a cooperative relationship. For instance, at a ‘quite hostile’ meeting with the men’s union in late 1917, initiated by the THC, the Female Confectioners representatives were told by the men they should join the men’s union (Victorian sub-branch meeting 26 November 1917).

Even after the energies spent on re-forming the union, Smith advised they should meet with the men’s union ‘to bring about one organisation in the industry’ (General Meeting, 28 October 1918). A year later, the union considered amalgamation or ‘com[ing] to some arrangement that would result in cooperation and harmony in all matters’ (General Meeting, 13 October 1919). As it would continue to be, the THC was in support of amalgamation, assisting with meetings and drawing up a set of rules to try to overcome the issues raised by the men’s union. Despite being ‘suspicious of the men’s union’, Smith saw merit in the THC proposal: two sections with equal representation, section committees, woman organiser, and a wages board with three men and two women, with one man being a general worker (Special General Meeting, 22 December 1919).

Throughout the 1920s, amalgamation would be a constant shadow. The Wages Board dispute over Johnston ended amalgamation discussions in 1920. Even so, the Female Confectioners continued to support amalgamation but with strict conditions: ‘any further negotiations for amalgamation with other unions must be on the basis of sectional interests for the sexes as far as the Victorian branch is concerned’ (Annual Meeting 10 January 1921, Federal Executive special meeting 12 May 1921, Federal Council 18 July 1921). In 1922, while still meeting with the men’s union, Smith told the management committee he did not ‘anticipate success’, ‘regret[ing] that every attempt seemed doomed to failure’ (Management Committee, 29 March 1922). The following month, Smith ‘was certain that every effort was being made to avoid amalgamation’ (Management Committee, 10 April 1922). The members agreed that any agreement had to allow for ‘the Women controlling their own sectional interests in Committee and in General Meeting as at present exists’ (Branch meeting 8 May 1922). Both unions then dug in with the men’s union reportedly no longer wanting any sections. With the men adamant that they would not agree to ‘this complete power to a section to negotiate with employers’, the THC executive advised ‘we feel that we must endorse their attitude’ (Branch meeting 11 July 1922). Despite THC support for ongoing consideration of terms for amalgamation, the Female Confectioners’ membership supported their leaders. At a special general meeting, they ‘voiced their objections to amalgamation, particularly to any scheme that did not give the women control over their own sectional interests’ (Special General Meeting, 14 August 1922). For a short while, there was
then little interest in amalgamation with an overture from the Manufacturing Grocers Union rebuffed because the Female Confectioners had ‘no desire to amalgamate with any other organisation’ (Management Committee, 29 September 1924).

The New South Wales (NSW) Journeymen’s Confectionery Union’s application for federal registration temporarily changed the dynamic (Management Committee, 12 May, 4 August 1924). The NSW union proposed there be one union with sectional autonomy and equal representation on the federal council. This led to yet another attempt to bring about one union, again with assistance from the THC, this time as a federation with two autonomous sections subject to the control of a federal council with equal representation of women and men (Management Committee, 17 November 1924). Despite there being ‘a deal of heat in the [Arbitration Court] proceedings, particularly between [Smith] and McLaughlin’ (now the men’s union secretary), rules were finally agreed and the Federated Confectioners Association of Australia was registered (Management Committee, 4 May, 22 June 1925). The next step was ‘consummation’ of the amalgamation between the Federated Confectioners, the Female Confectioners, the Victorian men’s union and the South Australian confectioners union.

The need for conciliatory relations between the men’s union and the Female Confectioners to effect this consummation, however, was undermined by the conflict paralysing the Wages Board. At the meetings to work through the amalgamation, Smith refused to discuss anything until the wages board situation was resolved. Allegations the men’s union had sought to organise women in South Australia, in breach of an agreed process, heightened the tension. Smith claimed: ‘His union was disgusted with the rotten state of affairs that had existed in Victoria for many years’. Furthermore, he contended: ‘If the Conference could not settle this matter, it could settle nothing’. With the matter unable to be resolved, the meeting concluded ‘with the regret that the male and female sections in Victoria cannot come to an amicable agreement’ over the representation issue (Management Committee, 8 March 1926). Smith was adamant he could not see any way out of difficulty … he was now more than ever determined that they should not enter the federation unless the Women’s section had absolute control over the women’s sectional interests (Management Committee, 25 October 1926).
Both the State Conference and the Federal Council agreed to refrain from entering into any negotiations and amalgamation with the federated union slid off the agenda (State Conference 21 October 1926, Management Committee, 20 December 1926).

When Smith suddenly died in May 1927, there was a change in strategy but by the men’s union launching a direct attack on the Female Confectioners in the workplace. McLaughlin signed up 112 women and girls at Hoadley’s, a firm known for its anti-unionism in Melbourne and attempted to do so in Adelaide where ‘he told the girls there that he was entitled to organise women in Victoria’. That he signed the women up to the men’s union, not even the federated union, was seen as proof that the men’s union could not be trusted. Although he was ordered by the THC to hand over the Hoadley’s women members, the damage was done. Trying to get the women who had signed up to the men’s union to become members proved almost impossible for the Female Confectioners. Some who had joined the men’s union ‘would not join owing to the bother they had in regard to that Union’ (Management Committee, 16 April, 7 May 1928, General Meeting, 11 July 1927, 9 July 1928).

The conflict with the men’s union was thus ever present. The organisation of women confectionery workers was argued by Smith to be

all the more creditable by virtue of the fact that it has been obtained without the assistance of any other organisation, and in the face of the most bitter opposition of other Unions who should have been allies on its efforts to obtain better conditions of women (Secretary’s report, 1st Annual Conference Victorian/Tasmanian branch 9 March 1924).

At best it could be regarded as a distraction, but at worst the conflict negatively affected the capacity of union to focus on its members. Time and energy was spent on fruitless meetings, on discussing strategies, on mounting cases or objections to applications made to the Arbitration Court.

The interests of their members were adversely affected when Wages Board meetings saw clear divisions amongst the employee representatives, with the women delegates unable to rely on support from the delegates from the men’s union. Wages Board outcomes were voted on by the members, with the chairman having a casting vote, and so there was little opportunity to be able to get a majority view if there were schisms among the employees delegates. Fights over representation also ensured that a wages strategy dependent on a functioning Wages Board was a precarious one. Alternative industrial strategies needed to be pursued.
Women’s representation and voice

In the separate organising literature, autonomous organising (which is outside existing union structures, such as women-only unions) is distinguished from separate organising (which occurs within unions such as women’s committees) (Briskin 1999, Broadbent and Ford 2008b: 5-7). Separate organising can also be understood as a continuum, with internal structures at one point and women-only unions at another (Cobble 1990). One of the debated issues with autonomous organising is the degree of separatism. In the case of the Female Confectioners Union, there is overwhelming evidence that there was no desire for separatism. There was early integration into the industrial relations system, the broader union movement and then the labour movement. This began with the union movement through meetings in the Trades Hall, THC affiliation and, later on, affiliation with the forerunner of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, tenancy in the Trades Hall, financial support for other unions and receiving reciprocal support. Participation in the wages board system, collective bargaining with employers, and federal registration all contributed to the union pursuing a variety of industrial strategies in order to improve members’ terms and conditions of employment. Federal registration proved to be a safeguard for the Female Confectioners with the ‘conveniently belong’ provisions providing organisational security when the men’s union tried to register an organisation with overlapping coverage. Integration then extended to the labour movement when the union affiliated with the Australian Labor Party in 1925. The women became active in Labor women’s activities, sending six delegates to the 1925 Labor Women’s Conference and from 1928, delegates to the Women’s Central Organising Committee (Management Committee, 23 March 1925).

With the persistent theme of ‘control over sectional interests’ throughout the debates about amalgamated and federated structures, the Female Confectioners’ case illustrates separate organising as a continuum. Their separate organising did not exclude men, with support from men at critical stages (formation and reformation). Early in 1922, it was announced that as men were joining the union, a men’s section would need to be formed, though nothing came of this (Management Committee, 23 January 1922).

As with all the women’s unions, the Female Confectioners 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. Smith’s legacy, in Jean Daley’s obituary, was he had ‘made a fine and self-reliant group of women who can take up the battle where he laid it down, intelligently and militantly’ (Women’s Clarion June 1927).

The core leadership group constituted Margaret Wearne, her sister Flora Wearne, treasurer since 1921 and Miranda Hill (committee member 1922-3, vice president 1924, president 1925, assistant secretary and organiser from 1927). Other key women in the broader leadership group included May Webber (Pres 1922/23, committee 1923-1929, VP 1930), Jean Elliott (President 1923/24, 1925-26), Maud Howard (President 1927, 1930, vice president 1929) and Ruby Warway (VP 1925, President 1926 & 1928; committee 1922-1924, 1927, 1930). All served as state conference and federal conference delegates. Jean Daley was one of the union’s ALP delegates and on the THC delegation.

Smith spoke of the difficulties of being secretary of a women’s union and organising challenges in 1923:

It must be always understood that a women’s Union consisted of a large proportion of very young girls who by the very nature of things had a very light sense of responsibility which made the difficulties about twenty times greater than that of a men’s union (Annual Meeting 12 February 1923).

In 1924, it was reported there were 1828 financial members. Un-financial members were estimated at more than 5000 even though there were only 1500 female employees in the trade. This showed an astounding indication of the ebb and flow that takes place amongst women in the Confectionery Industry and a surprising indication of the huge difficulty that continually confront the Union in its efforts to combat these [sic] and create a successful organisation amongst women and girls … The organisation of women, more particularly in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations, will always be a matter of extreme difficulty; but I most confidently assert that our Union has achieved greater success in the organisation of women and girls that has ever been accomplished by any other Union, in any industry. (Secretary’s report, 1st Annual Conference Victorian/Tasmanian branch 9 March 1924).

Gender was not always a unifying factor, as seen in a debate over a marriage bar in 1929. Discussion at a general meeting (begun by a notice of motion by ‘Miss Daley’) led to agreement there should be a marriage bar in the factories, when the women had an employed husband (General Meeting, 9 September 1929). Harry Smith had averted an earlier discussion in 1925 but after his death and with the onset of the depression and increasing unemployment in the
trade, there were no dissenting voices. That this was not just rhetoric was underscored when the matter was discussed with MacRobertson’s and the firm agreed to consider this when next dismissing employees (General Meeting, 11 November 1929). These divisions along marital lines remind us of the different voices and interests among the women and underscore the complexity of gender and unionism, as already seen with the contrasting patterns of support and opposition from men.

To ensure the interests of the women were represented and their voice sustained, the Female Confectioners Union’s argument rested on the need for sectional representation. This was located in the reality of a hostile relationship with the men’s union and a lack of trust: whether this was illustrated by conflict on the wages board, attempts to get federal coverage and challenge the union’s representation of women, deception over the right to represent women as in South Australia or the poaching/encroaching on workplaces as seen in the recruitment at Hoadley’s. The importance of maintaining a separate organisation so as to protect the interests and voice of the women confectionery workers was underlined time and again by the strategies and actions of the men’s union. Amalgamation discussions had to be framed by recognition of the need for, and legitimacy of, sectional representation.

**Conclusion**

This analysis of the Female Confectioners has focused on the nature and impact of inter-union conflict and how this influenced decisions about representation and voice of women workers. For the Female Confectioners, separate organising as a women’s union was prompted by the neglect of the women workers by the men’s union, to the point their work was described as a ‘sweated trade’. As the ongoing discussions about amalgamation or ‘one union’ showed, there was an ideological commitment to industrial unionism among the Female Confectioners leadership. Offsetting this was the reality of the treatment by the men’s union, whether on the wages board, in the Arbitration Court or in the workplace. Here the women’s (and their male secretary’s) commitment to separate organising, whether in the form of a separate union or as a separate section in an amalgamated union, was emphatic. Over and again, they entered into discussions only for the men’s union to demonstrate its reluctance to accept the non-negotiable issue of the women, control over their sectional interests. Just as regularly, the men’s union sought to exert control over the women, by seeking to change its rules to be able to encroach on the members or to dominate the deliberations of the Wages Board. For the Female Confectioners, separate organising was necessary to ensure women’s voices could be heard and women’s union space be protected.
References

*The Argus*, 2 July 1917, 4 October 1917.

*Women’s Clarion*, June 1927.

Confectioners Wages Board, minutes 1919-1932.

Eight Hours Anniversary Committee, minutes, 1911.

Female Confectioners Union, meeting and committee minutes, 1916-1930.

Trade Hall council minutes, 1911, 1919.


