

Women and Wage Labour in Australia and Canada, 1880-1980

Raelene Frances, Linda Kealey et Joan Sangster

Volume 38, 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt38art04>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Frances, R., Kealey, L. & Sangster, J. (1996). Women and Wage Labour in Australia and Canada, 1880-1980. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 38, 54-89.

Résumé de l'article

A century of women's work history in Australia and Canada reveals both similarities and contrasts. Women workers in both countries have faced persistent occupational segregation and lower pay, justified by the "family wage" ideal of a male breadwinner and the accompanying perception of women's paid labour as secondary, less skilled and transient. While Canada's female labour force has historically demonstrated a significant proportion of immigrants from countries other than England, Australia's female labour force contained fewer immigrants but revealed a visible minority of Aboriginals who have demonstrated labour militancy in several well-known disputes in this century. Perhaps the most striking differences between the two countries, however, relate to the extent of the Australian state's involvement in wage tribunals and in the compulsory arbitration system, both of which have given women improved wages and "a floor of protection." By contrast, state intervention in Canada was minimal until well into the 20th century when minimum wage laws were passed during and after World War I. Despite these differences there are areas of similarity, particularly in this century as women workers tended to mobilize at roughly the same time, not only in unions and work places but also in neighbourhoods, ethnic communities, rural areas and to some extent in labour and left wing political groups. Modern feminist movements in both countries have waged some successful campaigns to change not only government views and agendas, but also those of trade unions. Thus, while Australian women have perhaps been more successful at "playing the state" depending on the government in power, both groups of women are increasingly faced with the challenge of government retreat from egalitarian policies under the onslaught of a right-wing, corporatist agenda.

Women and Wage Labour in Australia and Canada, 1880-1980

Raelene Frances, Linda Kealey, and Joan Sangster*

ONE OF THE MOST important, yet subtle revolutions in the labour force of the industrialized countries over the past 100 years has been the increasing growth of female participation in formal wage work. The most significant and rapid changes have come in the post-World War II years, as women's participation rate in the labour force has climbed steadily, along with significant changes in the marital and family profile of women workers, who are increasingly partnered, and/or have dependent children. Since 1940, for instance, the female share of the labour force has more than doubled and the female participation rate has tripled.¹

In some ways this revolution, or feminization of the workforce has simply involved a re-deployment of women's work, a change in the locale of their daily labour. As Jill Matthews has pointed out for the Australian case, the increased employment of married women in the 1950s and 1960s reflected the penetration of capital into the informal economy, where married women had been diligently working, producing goods and services for many years.² Similarly, Marjorie

* Thanks to Bruce Scates.

¹Pat and Hugh Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work*, 3rd ed. (Toronto 1994), 15.

²Jill Matthews, points to five areas of paid work already done by women for money; the private sale of skills such as laundering and child minding; the sale of home produce, such as food and crafts; the provision of lodging; the operation of small businesses, such as sewing, music lessons; and outwork done for industry. See Jill Matthews, "Deconstructing the masculine universe: the case of women's work," in Women and Labour Publications, eds., *All her Labours: Working it Out* (Sydney 1984); see also Raelene Frances, "Never Done but Always Done Down," in V. Burgmann and J. Lee, eds., *Making a Life: A People's History of Australia* (Melbourne 1988), 117-32.

Raelene Frances, Linda Kealey, and Joan Sangster, "Women and Wage Labour in Australia and Canada, 1880-1980," *Labour/Le Travail*, 38 (Fall 1996)/*Labour History*, 71 (November 1996), 54-89.

Cohen's economic study of 19th-century Canadian women argues that even in the family-based agricultural economy, women's domestic labour and especially their generation of small cash through activities such as dairying facilitated the accumulation of land and capital for rural families.³ Notwithstanding this important reminder that women have always worked, and taking into account the under-representation of women, especially non-Anglo women, in labour force statistics (discussed below), this article will focus primarily on women's formal labour force participation, concentrating especially on the changes which occurred since the late 19th century.

One of the most obvious similarities between Canada and Australia is the persistence of occupational segregation of women in the labour force, as well as the ideological justification for this separation, based on a model of a nuclear, heterosexual family of male breadwinner and female "dependent." Similarly, wage inequality based on gender, the undervaluing of women's work, the double oppression of indigenous women and women of colour, and neglect of women's occupational hazards at work are all depressing similarities between the two countries. Explanations for the resilience of a sexual division of labour, as well as its particular contours, for the persistence of the family wage ideal and for the marginalization of non-Anglo women workers may therefore bear similarities in these countries. Examining the patterns of inequality and oppression women experience across national boundaries may be a useful means of uncovering the rationales, causes, and weaknesses of these interconnected systems of class, race, and gender exploitation.

At the same time, the similarities should not be overstated. The very different legal regimes, especially with relation to unions and bargaining, the different economic structures in each country, and different histories of immigration have produced important contrasts which must also be integrated in our analysis and used to modify these larger theories. The most striking difference between the Canadian and Australian industrial scenes is the existence of compulsory arbitration in the latter. Australian feminist literature on arbitration has argued that it has had important consequences for women workers. On the negative side, it has acted to institute or solidify sexual divisions of labour which relegated women to lower paid, lower status work. More positively, it has provided "a floor of protection" for the wages and conditions of female workers especially valuable in times of economic downturn. It has also arguably prevented the differentials between male and female earnings from widening even further.⁴ In some versions of the argument, the Australian centralized wage-fixing system is held entirely responsible for the higher earnings of full-time female workers compared to their counterparts

³Marjorie Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto 1988).

⁴C. O'Donnell and Nerolie Golder, "A Comparative Analysis of Equal Pay in the United States, Britain and Australia," *Australian Feminist Studies*, 3 (1986), 59-90.

in unregulated industrial relations systems such as that in the United States.⁵ To date, however, no such systematic comparisons have been conducted between Australia and Canada, although their more similar economic structures would suggest some profitable analysis in this direction.

Women's Labour Force Participation

While the Canadian and Australian economies varied in substantive ways, both experienced a period of industrialization after the mid 19th century which led to increased numbers of women participating in the paid workforce. Women, far more than men, remained seasonal, domestic, and part-time workers as the economy expanded in the 20th century, but their participation in paid work was still a major factor in the production of wealth in both countries. And while some facets of their work — their occupational segregation — remained depressingly constant, there was one decided change over time: their increased participation in work for pay.

From the 1880s on, women's participation rate in the Canadian workforce climbed steadily along with increased immigration, industrial expansion, and the transformation of agricultural and home production to workshop and factory production. In 1891, women made up about 11 per cent of the total workforce; by 1921, this had increased to 15 per cent, and by 1951, women composed 22 per cent of the workforce.

In Australia, for the first half of the 20th century the proportion of women officially in paid work remained fairly constant at around 25 per cent, except for a slump in the 1930s depression and an increase during both wars, especially World War II. Women made up one-fifth of the total workforce, a figure almost identical to the Canadian one for 1951. After the war the proportion of women in paid work rose steadily in both countries, but at a slightly higher rate in Canada. In Australia the figures reached 26 per cent in 1954, 35 per cent in 1966, and exceeded 40 per cent in 1973.⁶ Over the same period, the percentage of Canadian women in the official workforce rose from 22 per cent in 1951 to 27.3 per cent in 1961 and 34.6 per cent in 1971. By 1983, 52.1 per cent of Australian women were in paid work, compared to 60.1 per cent of Canadian women.⁷

The majority of Canadian women in the workforce before World War II were single, and either supported themselves, or more often contributed to a family wage economy, with their blue- and white-collar wages. Women's work did vary considerably across the country, with some regions highly dependent on seasonal work and household production, such as the fisheries in the Maritimes. In more regionally depressed areas of the country such as Newfoundland, which became

⁵Patricia Grimshaw, *et al.*, *Creating a Nation* (Ringwood 1994).

⁶Kaye Hargreaves, *Women at Work* (Ringwood 1982), 19.

⁷K. Alford and M. McLean, "Partners or parasites of men? Women's Economic Status in Australia, Britain and Canada, 1850-1900," *Working Papers in Economic History*, 66 (April 1986), 6. Armstrong and Armstrong, *Double Ghetto*, 16.

part of Canada in 1949, there is also evidence that women's wages, no matter how small, could make up a significant part of the family's basic subsistence; in inter-war St. John's, for example, daughters doing domestic, shop or factory work, might become the sole support of the family in times of unemployment.⁸ Other regions also had distinctive female work patterns; the prairies had high levels of agricultural and domestic labour, while industrial work was more clearly centred in Ontario and Quebec. In Australia, rural, maritime, and mining industries dominated the economies of Queensland and Western Australia for much longer than the more quickly industrialized south-east. Here, too, the fragility and instability of the male wage meant that women's earnings were crucial to the family's survival.

Official labour force participation rates undoubtedly under-represented women's remunerative work, in part because of women's high involvement in the informal economy (where exchange or barter might also take place) and because their work as servants was often sporadic and insecure. Traditional methods of describing and measuring work have especially obscured the work of native, and later visible minority women. As Sylvia Van Kirk has shown in her work on the fur trade, native women's unpaid labour was essential to the process of profit and accumulation which built the capitalist enterprise of the Hudson's Bay Company. Later, native women's work was often an essential part of kin production, such as farming, hunting, and trapping, but this was seldom registered in official censuses, a fact accentuated by the state's attempts to marginalize native people within a reserve system. Similar difficulties occur in relation to the work of Australian Aboriginal women, who were not even counted in the national census until 1971. Nevertheless, their work in the pastoral, maritime, and mining industries of northern and central Australia was often crucial both to the economic viability of these enterprises and to the survival of dispossessed Aboriginal groups.⁹

A similar problem was encountered in assessing the work of later female immigrants, such as Chinese women coming to British Columbia in the early 20th century. These women worked in family businesses or as domestics, but were less likely to be in blue-collar jobs, and they were banned from some white-collar and professional jobs. Given the active efforts of the state to discourage the immigration of Asian women (because of their reproductive role) their work was more likely to be hidden from official census takers within households or small businesses. Similarly, Japanese women engaging in the sex industry in northern Australia in

⁸Marilyn Porter, "Mothers and Daughters: Linking Women's Life Histories in Grand Bank, Newfoundland, Canada," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 11 (1988); Nancy Forestell, "Times Were Hard: The Pattern of Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two Wars," *Labour/Le Travail*, 24 (1989), 147-66.

⁹A. McGrath, *'Born in the Cattle': Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney 1987); H. Reynolds, *With the White People* (Ringwood 1990); Su-Jane Hunt, *Spinifex and Hessian: Women in North-Western Australia, 1860-1900* (Nedlands 1989); D. Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories* (Canberra 1991); Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society* (Winnipeg 1980).

the late 19th and early 20th centuries made a significant contribution to the process of capital accumulation to finance the pearling industry, but the illegal nature of their enterprises has hidden this part of their activities from official statisticians.¹⁰

The most notable increase in the numbers of women in the official workforce, as well as changes in the jobs they did, came during the temporary crisis of World War II, which offered a small number of women, at least in eastern Australia and central Canada, increased wages and employment opportunities. As labour shortages increased by 1943, the government also encouraged the use of married women workers, even providing funds for daycare, a practice never before countenanced and quickly abandoned after the war. For black women in Ontario, the war provided their first opportunity to enter factories, as they had been previously shut out of most blue-collar work. After a marked increase of women's participation in wage work during the war, however, the numbers of women in the workforce dipped as women — particularly married women — were pushed out of better paying jobs in particular by a combination of concerted government policy, an intensified ideology of female domesticity, and union disinclination to fight for full employment for both men and women. Canadian black women encountered a particularly demoralizing reality: "Escape as they tried, domestic work stared black women in the face once again."¹¹

Despite this temporary decline in women's official wage labour, the long-term trend after the war in both countries was for more women, and especially married women and women with children, to enter the workforce, especially if they lived in urban areas. Whereas only 4 per cent of Canada's married women worked for wages in 1941, by 1961 22 per cent did. A similar increase occurred in Australia. Whereas only 5 per cent of married women were officially recorded as doing paid work before the war, the figure for 1951 was 11 per cent, rising to 17 per cent in 1961, and almost doubling in the next decade to reach 32 per cent in 1971.¹² By the 1960s a two-phase working life for women was taking shape, as those in the 35 to 54 age cohort were re-entering the workforce, and staying, after a temporary absence in young adulthood.¹³

The rapid changes in women's wage work since World War II were shaped on the one hand, by an expansion of jobs, especially in the service, trade, and finance

¹⁰See for example, Gillian Creese, "Class, Ethnicity and Conflict: The Case of Chinese and Japanese Immigrants 1880-1923," in Rennie Warburton and D. Coburn, eds., *Workers, Capital and the State in British Columbia — Selected Papers* (Vancouver 1988), 55-85; Hunt, *Spinifex and Hessian*; Clive Moore, "A Precious Few: Melanesian and Asian Women in Northern Australia," in K. Saunders and R. Evans, eds., *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation* (Sydney 1991), 59-81.

¹¹Dionne Brand, "We weren't allowed to go into the factory until Hitler started the war: the 1920s to the 1940s," in Peggy Bristow, et al., eds., *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (Toronto 1994), 189.

¹²Hargreaves, *Women at Work*, 19, 24.

¹³Sylvia Ostry, *The Female Worker in Canada* (Ottawa 1968), 6.

sectors where there were new jobs deemed "appropriate" for women, and on the other hand, by the economic pull of family need and the changing structure of domestic labour. Families needed more cash to meet mortgage, tax, heating, education, and transportation costs.¹⁴ At the same time, a consumer-oriented economy, and one in which domestic work and products were increasingly commodified, meant that women were more likely to use wages than unpaid work or the informal economy to help sustain their households.

Any quest for economic independence, however, was stymied by women's second class status within the labour force. Most of these "new" women workers remained highly concentrated within a few areas in the workforce and subject to difficult working conditions as well as wages that were below, sometimes far below, those of men.

Wages

Evidence on wages for male and female workers in Canada is sketchy before the 20th century. Unlike Australia where wage tribunals existed from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Canadian wages were not subject to significant state intervention until minimum wage acts were passed in this century. Thus, our knowledge of wages in the years before 1920 depends on occasional investigations commissioned by governments or on case studies of particular cities, provinces, or industries. What evidence there is suggests that female workers in Canada, like their Australian counterparts, generally earned half the wages paid to men.¹⁵

Wages for Canadian women did not improve in the period between the turn of the century and World War I. On the eve of the war there is plenty of evidence to suggest that women workers still earned less than a living wage.¹⁶ Labour shortages during the war lifted women's wages temporarily, but they were still between 40 and 60 per cent of the wages paid to men. Scattered studies investigating women's wages in the 1920s suggest that women's wages continued to trail behind men's, despite the hopes of suffragists that the vote would usher in a "new day" for working women and despite (some said because of) the enactment of minimum wage laws in many provinces.¹⁷

¹⁴Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, "Taking Women into Account: Redefining and intensifying employment in Canada," in Jane Jenson, E. Hagen, C. Reddy, eds., *Feminization of the Labour Force* (New York 1988), 72.

¹⁵Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto 1993); David Gagan and Rosemary Gagan, "Working Class Standards of Living in Late Victorian Urban Ontario: A Review of the Miscellaneous Evidence on The Quality of Material Life," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, New Series 1 (1990), 171-194.

¹⁶British Columbia Archives and Records Service, Royal Commission on Labour, GR 684, 1914.

¹⁷Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-39* (Toronto 1992), 121-2.

60 WOMEN and WAGE LABOUR

Although more systematic data on Canadian wages is available after the 1930s, the message is very much the same, the wage gap between men and women in manufacturing varied from women earning 58 to 59 per cent of the male wage in the 1930s to 54 to 55 per cent in some years of the 1940s. While women's earnings as a percentage of men's rose again slightly in the 1950s, no significant changes occurred.¹⁸ Perhaps most depressing and of some contrast to Australia, are recent studies which surveyed women's incomes as a percentage of men's for all occupations. In 1970, it was estimated that women earned 59.5 per cent of what men earned; by 1980 this had risen to 63.8 per cent. In 1990, the figure was 67.4 per cent.¹⁹

The persistence of a significant wage gap characterizes the general history of women's wages in Canada and the absence of significant state intervention in this area stands in stark contrast to Australian conditions. While Canadian governments instituted some very weak minimum-wage laws after 1920, and strictly defined equal-pay laws after 1950, women workers did not enjoy the same comprehensive opportunity to use the state to regulate wages as did unionized Australian women.

Comparative evidence seems to indicate that the Australian and Canadian gender wage gap was largely the same until World War II, then some women in Australia were able to use the arbitration system to narrow wage differentials, and quite substantially so after 1972. But it was not the existence of the legal machinery *per se*, as much as the political use it was put to under pressure of women and unions that produced this difference.

There is no doubt that the position of women wage-earners in Australia improved dramatically in relation to men during the 1970s. Between 1972 and 1981 the amount women in full-time employment earned compared to men jumped from 65 cents for every dollar to 80 cents. When part-time workers are included, women's earnings increased from 60 cents for every dollar which males earned in 1972 to 67 cents in 1981.²⁰ Almost all of this increase occurred in the wake of the 1972 equal pay decision in the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission and its 1974 decision to extend the minimum wage to women as well as men.²¹ It is important to note that this was not the result of the system as such; the political will of the Whitlam Government was also crucial.

If we shift our focus to the more distant past, the picture is less easily quantified, due to the lack of a gender breakdown in official income statistics. Nevertheless, we can chart some general directions in the relative wages of men and women by

¹⁸ *Historical Statistics of Canada*, 2nd edition (1983), E 60-8; E 69-70.

¹⁹ Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, 43.

²⁰ Clare Burton, *The Promise and the Price: The struggle for equal opportunity in women's employment* (Sydney 1991), 146.

²¹ Edna Ryan and Ann Conlon, *Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work, 1788-1974* (West Melbourne 1975); Carol O'Donnell and Philippa Hall *Getting Equal: Labour Market Regulation and Women's Work* (Sydney 1988); Burton, *The Promise and the Price*.

looking at rates awarded by Federal and State wage-fixing tribunals since these tribunals tended generally to reflect/influence relativities in the labour market. The broad trend shows an increase in female wage rates compared to men's from around 50 per cent at the beginning of the 20th century, to 54 per cent by the end of World War I, to 75 per cent by the end of World War II. No further significant gains were made until the 1970s, when the equal pay and minimum wage decisions of the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission precipitated another increase in female wages.²² The fact that women's wages rose relative to men's in all industrial countries (except the US) in the early 1970s suggests that the Arbitration Commission's decisions cannot be held entirely responsible for the Australian situation. Nevertheless, as Glenn Withers has cautiously pointed out, "an apparently faster and greater change of female relativities in Australia may owe something to the arbitration commission."²³ By 1983 Australian women's full time earnings were 80 per cent of men's; by comparison Canadian women's were 65 per cent.

Conditions

Attitudes towards health, safety, and working conditions also indicated some similarities between the two countries. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the health and safety of women workers was a topic of heated debate, particularly among social reformers and labour movement activists. This debate, however, was more likely to focus on moral issues especially among middle-class observers who feared that women's wage labour might lead to immorality, disease, and prostitution. Up to World War I, labour movement spokesmen were just as likely to advocate the abolition of female labour in factories and shops as to argue for legislation of a protective nature. The national labour umbrella organization in Canada, the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC), for example, advocated the abolition of child and female labour in its national platform as a means of protecting the working-class family and male wage levels.

Nevertheless, some working-class and middle-class advocates did campaign for Factory Acts to limit hours of work for women and children as well as to promote more sanitary conditions. Offended by the idea that women and children worked long hours for low pay in places that provided no separate sanitary facilities for women or ignored fire and machine safety, advocates of Factory Acts hoped

²²Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*. If we take the average rates awarded to women in all industries compared to the male average rates the figures follow the same general chronology but are slightly lower. Thus, the average wage awarded to women in 1914 was 48.2 per cent that granted to men; there was no major change in this figure until 1939 when it increased to 53.6 per cent. By 1945 it was up to 60.6 per cent and jumped again in 1950 to 70.4 per cent. Small increases occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s, followed by a jump from 74.2 per cent to 77.8 per cent in 1972 and a further increase to 86.4 per cent in 1974. See Glenn A. Withers, "Labour 1900 to 1984," *Working Papers in Economic History*, 28 (1984), 29-30.

²³Withers, "Labour 1900 to 1984," 32.

that this kind of provincial legislation would ensure minimum standards backed up by inspectors with the power to enforce the law. Ultimately, however, the concern for women's health and safety was predicated more on their reproductive well-being and that of future generations of children. Such legislation was often the product of compromise between employer interests, social reformers' concerns, and organized labour's limited pressure.²⁴

Although factory legislation was passed in Ontario and Quebec in the 1880s and in the Maritime Provinces early in the 20th century, enforcement was always inadequate. The lack of female inspectors and the continued prevalence of outwork and the piece-rate system made policing sporadic in the cities and virtually non-existent in smaller centres. It is also difficult to generalize about changing working conditions over time because of the variety of workplaces in which women have been employed. In larger workplaces, standards of ventilation, lighting, temperature control, seating, eating and sanitary facilities, and safety controls have generally improved in both countries since the introduction of protective legislation and protective clauses in awards from the late 19th century. Twentieth century factory design also tended to take more account of workers' comfort as a factor in productivity, while welfare schemes in some firms provided better recreation facilities and other benefits to employees. As with the question of working hours, however, the benefits of female workers were by no means uniform. Large numbers of women continued to work in small, unregulated workplaces and in occupations, such as domestic service and nursing, not covered by any factory legislation.

A stronger union movement in Australia, with more political clout, did result in a reduction in hours earlier in the 20th century. Historically, Australia has prided itself on being one of the first places in the world to introduce the Eight-Hour Day, won by stonemasons in the 1850s. Although few other workers actually shared in a 48-hour week in the 19th century, by the first 2 decades of the 20th century the 48-hour week was the standard under the Commonwealth Arbitration Court (CAC) and the various State tribunals. This was reduced to 44 hours in some industries by the 1920s. A 40-hour week was introduced by the CAC in 1948 and remained the standard until the late 1970s when a few industries began operating a 37 hour week.²⁵

This rather Whiggish story of steady progress for workers is, however, somewhat misleading when applied to women workers. Although many female workers shared in the general reductions in the length of the paid working week, most continued to work a double shift, performing unpaid domestic tasks in their "free" time. For women, the most significant milestones occurred with the reduc-

²⁴Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada 1885-1925* (Toronto 1991); Eric Tucker, *Administering Danger in the Workplace: The Law and Politics of Occupational Health and Safety Regulation in Ontario, 1850-1914* (Toronto 1990).

²⁵Withers, "Labour 1900 to 1984," 42-3.

tion in the opening hours of shops in the late 19th century. Large numbers of women were also affected by the 1919 decision of the CAC to reduce the hours for workers in the clothing trades to 44 per week. But these gains were by no means irrevocable and in times of economic recession and depression female workers especially found themselves working long hours in tasks such as clothing outwork to make ends meet. There was also increased pressure on women to extend their involvement in the informal economy, taking in boarders, doing laundry, or even engaging in prostitution, all of which increased the length of the working day (and night). The demands of wartime production in the 1940s also drew many women into the paid workforce and called on all workers to work longer hours for the war effort. For women, especially those with children, this was particularly onerous, as they were still expected to carry the domestic load as well as paid work. The recent influx of women into the official workforce has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in the amount of part-time work being undertaken, especially by married women and mothers. By the end of this period, more Australians worked part-time than anywhere else in the Western world with the exception of Sweden.²⁶ Whether or not the growth of part-time work is beneficial for workers depends largely on the conditions under which it operates. Some women, especially in teaching and public service jobs, have been able to obtain "permanent part-time" status which allows maximum flexibility in working hours yet entitles them to the benefits of full-time employment but on a pro-rata basis (for example, superannuation, paid holidays, long-service leave). For others, while part-time work has allowed them to cope better with the double shift of paid and unpaid work, it has meant casual employment at exploitative rates with little job security or union protection.

While the paid workplace was often unsanitary and dangerous for women workers exposed to fumes, dust, and unprotected machinery, the home was seldom a comfortable retreat for working-class women and their families. This was particularly so for women in abusive families or in the poorest families, often headed by a single-parent, or families whose breadwinners were unskilled or seasonally employed. In the late 19th century, working-class districts in major cities like Toronto and Montreal, Sydney and Melbourne, featured an abundance of dirty, damp, and overcrowded housing. Nor did this situation improve dramatically with the new century. Surveys in those cities at the end of World War I revealed thousands of overcrowded unsanitary homes where landlords charged exorbitant prices for a few rooms often without sanitary facilities.²⁷ Not until the post-World

²⁶Withers, "Labour 1900 to 1984," 43.

²⁷"Select Committee on the slum and congested areas, Sydney and Newcastle; Progress Report, together with proceedings ... and minutes of evidence," *NSW Parliamentary Papers*, 1920, 1, 1245-53; Paul Hicks, "Most humble houses": some notes on the housing investigations in Melbourne, 1913-17," *Labour History*, 52 (1987), 50-62; David Harris, "'Bad Neighbourhoods': The Inner Suburbs and the Housing Debate, Melbourne 1900-1920," MA thesis, Melbourne University, 1983; Michael Piva, *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto — 1900-21* (Ottawa 1979), ch. v.

64 WOMEN and WAGE LABOUR

War II period was there any concerted effort to tackle the problem of slum housing, and even today pockets of substandard and overcrowded dwellings renders the workplace of many housewives and outworkers an unpleasant and unhealthy environment.

The Sexual Division of Labour

What is remarkable about this contemporary pattern of female labour segregation is how similar the Australian situation is to that in Canada, and indeed, other industrialized countries. A study conducted of the situation in 1983 found that

Australian women are probably no more segregated *within* the labour force than in [the UK, the US, and Canada], at least at a broad industry level. In all four countries, male and female workers are fairly severely segregated in separate spheres, with the majority of women concentrated in two or three principal occupations and industries, compared with a considerably broader and more even distribution of male workers.²⁸

Nor has this situation changed significantly over the last century. Margaret Power found that despite the overall increase in women's workforce participation, the degree of their labour market segregation in Australia has changed remarkably little since the 1890s. In 1911 75 per cent of the total female workforce was employed in occupations where 50 per cent or more of the workforce was female. This figure was exactly the same in 1983.²⁹ By 1979, 83 per cent of women in the paid workforce were employed in the tertiary or service sectors (which covers wholesale and retail, finance, banking, insurance, community services, other services, utilities, communications, transport, and storage).

In 1951, two thirds of all Canadian women working for wages were concentrated in service industries; by 1991, more than four out of five were concentrated in these same areas, which are not, by and large, capital intensive industries with increasing productivity. Indeed, women have tended to work in jobs which have lower levels of compensation, are part time, and lack stability.³⁰ In the professional category women remain concentrated in teaching and nursing, and in the public

²⁸ Alford and McClean, "Partners or Parasites of Men?" 6. A similar exercise using more disaggregated occupational analysis of sex segregation in the Australian and US workforces conducted by R. Gregory and V. Ho supports these findings. See "Equal Pay and Comparable Worth: What Can the US learn from the Australian experience?" Centre for Economic Policy Research, Discussion Paper 123, Australian National University, Canberra, 1985, 22.

²⁹ M. Power, "Women's work is never done — by men," *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 17 (1975), 225-39; see also D.E. Lewis, "The Measurement and Interpretation of Segregation of Women in the Workforce," *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 25 (1983), 347-52; R.G. Gregory and R.C. Duncan, "The relevance of segmented labour market theories: the Australian experience of the achievement of equal pay for women," *Journal of Post-Keynesian Economics*, 3 (Spring 1981).

³⁰ Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, 27.

sector, which experienced substantial job expansion since World War II.³¹ A 1990 task force concluded that women were concentrated in 4 of 72 job categories, with 44 per cent of all women in the lower paid clerical/regulatory group.

Indeed, in both countries, protective legislation sometimes provided a legally enforceable way of limiting the kinds of work women could do, thus creating, maintaining, or re-establishing a more rigid sexual division of labour between and within industries. Both Australian and Canadian women were prevented from entering some kinds of work because of their exclusion from night-work under various factory acts. In both countries, women were found in areas such as textile, garment, food, and clothing manufacturing in the late 19th century, but in jobs considered less skilled than men's; over the course of the 20th century, they were integrated into mass production industries, but primarily in light not heavy (such as auto) jobs, and since World War II, their role in service and clerical work has increased, along with some expansion of work as health care professionals and teachers. But the "double ghetto," a labour force structured fundamentally on gender segregation, unequal access to jobs, and especially the undervaluing of women's work, remains central to women's experience in both countries. In fact, a 1980 OECD study that attempted to measure international differences in gender-based segregation in the post-World War II period found that the higher women's participation rate, the more intense the "overcrowding" or segregation — a depressing finding.³² The report also concluded that the degree of segregation by industrial sector is less than by occupational groups, as women tend to be concentrated in a small range of occupations even within different industries. Canada, for example, had one of the highest rates of women's segregation into the clerical sector, a fact substantiated in the path-breaking work of Pat and Hugh Armstrong on the ghettoization of women within the Canadian labour force.

In 1983, over 80 per cent of Australian women worked in occupations which were disproportionately female and just under 80 per cent of men worked in jobs that were disproportionately male. In 1971, every stenographer, typist, and receptionist was female, while every plasterer, electrician, and bricklayer was male. In 1977, 85 per cent of the female workforce worked in only 18 occupational classifications. Bookkeepers, cashiers, stenographers, typists, and clerks made up 34 per cent; domestic workers 17 per cent; shop assistants 13 per cent; teachers and nurses 7 per cent each; clothing, boot, and textile workers 2 per cent; and telephone operators a further 2 per cent. And while women's employment in traditional

³¹ Between 1946 and 1971, 40 per cent of new jobs in Canada were in public service. Armstrong and Armstrong, "Taking Women into Account."

³² Segregation was defined as a difference between the female share of a category and the female share of total employment, or, equivalently, as a difference between the percentages of male and female labour forces in any category. Isa Bakker, "Women's Employment in Comparative Perspective," in Jane Jenson, *et al.*, *Feminization of the Labor Force*, 28.

manufacturing industries such as clothing declined dramatically in the 1970s, they did not move into non-traditional jobs but rather into a greatly expanded tertiary sector, especially into finance and community service occupations.³³

As the Armstrongs point out, women's concentration in clerical work offers a good example of the push and pull of women into certain areas of the workforce. With changes in the production processes of white-collar work, the increase in corporate record keeping and paper work, and the fragmentation of clerical work, women were pulled into the workforce by cost-conscious employers, at the same time that they sought out clerical jobs as a means of sustaining the ailing family economy in a time of rising costs of living.

The steady increase in the number of women as part-time workers since the 1950s may be a further indication of intensifying labour market segmentation based on sex. The growth of part-time work and women's (especially married women with children) high representation as part-time workers is a further paradox of the feminization of the workforce for this niche for women workers is also increasingly becoming a low wage ghetto.³⁴ In 1989, about 25 per cent of the female work force in Canada was part time, compared with an even higher 40 per cent in Australia.³⁵ About one-quarter of these women, working in areas like fast food outlets, banks, and cleaning services, are involuntary part-time workers, who would choose full-time work if they could, while some hold multiple, part-time jobs. Moreover, even those who claim that they have chosen part-time work are often compelled to do so by the patriarchal organization of the family and child care or by external social and economic forces beyond their control, such as tax policies, lack of child care, lack of available jobs, and so on.

In the context of economic crisis, it has been argued, women's segregation in the labour force has and can act as a protection against job loss as men are unlikely to replace women in firmly sex-typed jobs. Again, this generalization is difficult to substantiate historically for all economic recessions and national contexts, and competing theories have also been developed to explain the effects of recession on women workers. Alternatively, the buffer theory suggests female labour is a flexible reserve army, pushed in and out of the workforce according to the economic needs of capital and the state, though this seems to be less and less true as more women are integrated into the labour force in a wide range of industries.³⁶

³³Hargreaves, *Women at Work*, 25-6. See also M. Power, "The Making of a Woman's Occupation," *Hecate*, 1 (1975), 26-8.

³⁴Bakker, "Women's Employment in Comparative Perspective," 22.

³⁵Ann Duffy and Noreen Pupo, *Part-time Paradox: Connecting Gender, Work and Family* (Toronto 1992).

³⁶Jane Humphries, "Women's Employment in Restructuring America: The Changing Experience of Women in Three Recessions," in Jill Rubery, ed., *Women and Recession* (London 1988), 31.

A substitution theory, on the other hand, suggests that employers may replace female labour with male workers in times of recession.³⁷

It is true that during the Great Depression Canadian and Australian women in some occupations were relatively insulated from unemployment because of long-standing traditions of sex segregation and the different timing of economic swings in female industries such as clothing manufacture. However, this was only part of the story: not only were the numbers of female unemployed vastly underrated due to gender-biased statistical gathering, but women faced massive *underemployment* as they were pushed into low paid domestic jobs and forced to suffer speed ups and wage cuts. Moreover in a limited number of occupations, substitution of male for cheaper female labour did take place.

As Jill Rubery points out, the various theories concerning women and economic recession may be overlapping and compatible, rather than entirely contradictory, and they may take on more explanatory force according to the particular national context, industry, and recession being investigated. Most importantly, sex segregation of the labour market is not incompatible with any of these three explanations and may well exist as an integral part of all of them. Even the idea of substitution of male for female labour may simply mean that the boundaries of sex typing are maintained, but are *re-drawn* as newly feminized jobs are created when men substitute for women in other jobs. Furthermore, the most recent work on the effects of the 1980s downturn on women workers posits a sobering antidote to any notions that sex segregation has a silver lining. Pat Armstrong has shown that Canadian women's unemployment has slowly risen, sometimes more than men's, along with their labour force participation. She also argues that the deconstruction of the Keynesian state and Fordist labour compromise has had very negative effects on women workers. They are often marginalized by gender-biased state employment and training policies, capital's search for cheaper and more flexible labour, deregulation, and privatization.³⁸

Women's particular vulnerability to recessions and unemployment was, and still is intensified if they were recent immigrants, and especially if they were non-Anglo, or women of colour. The labour force in both countries was fractured both by gender and by ethnic and racial divisions, and for women of colour especially wage work could become a further double ghetto. The occupational segregation of women of colour was far more severe than that of white women. Indeed white women and some trade unions participated in campaigns to exclude some groups, such as Asian women, from even coming to Canada or Australia. For example, the Chinese women immigrants in Canada faced not only patriarchal

³⁷Marjorie Cohen, "Women at Work in Canada During the Great Depression," unpublished paper presented at Blue Collar Conference, Windsor, May 1979; Jill Rubery, "Introduction" to *Women and Recession*, 3.

³⁸Pat Armstrong, *Labour Pains: Women's Work in Crisis* (Toronto 1984).

traditions within their own and Canadian culture, but also the racial discrimination structured into state policies which attempted to discourage their immigration.³⁹

It is significant that Canadian immigration policy continued to discriminate by race until the 1960s. Even when women of colour were granted entry to the country before this, as in the case of Caribbean domestics or trained nurses, immigration restrictions, along with the preferences of Canadian employers continued to channel black women into the lower echelons of their occupation and place unusually demeaning limits on their life choices. Black women employed as nursing aids still face discriminatory practices and are most likely to be part-time, seasonal workers.

Similarly, women of colour did not enter Australia on the same basis as European women. Restrictive immigration policies from the late 19th century increasingly discriminated against non-Europeans from other countries and became national policy in 1901 with the enactment of the White Australia Policy. It is only since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 that significant changes have occurred in this policy to allow immigrants from Asia and the Middle East.

Those women who were allowed into Australia did not enter the same range of occupations as Australian-born women or those born in the UK. In the 19th century, a disproportionately high number of Irish women were concentrated in the lower-paid, lower-status occupations to such an extent that the Irish domestic servant became a cultural stereotype.⁴⁰ Japanese and French women were disproportionately represented amongst the ranks of prostitutes. More recent waves of immigrants from non-English-speaking countries have also tended to concentrate in the lower rungs of the female occupational hierarchy, performing blue- and pink-collar rather than white-collar work. At the 1976 Australian Census, although migrant women from these countries comprised 15.2 per cent of the total female workforce, they represented 42.1 per cent of the manufacturing workforce and 21.1 per cent of female service workers.⁴¹

Non-Anglo women in Canada likewise faced discriminatory practices, undervaluing of their skills, and limited opportunities. Post-World War II southern Italian immigrant women, who received a fearful and inhospitable welcome from the dominant Anglo culture of Toronto, were more likely to work for wages than British-born women, but their lack of language skills, their double work day, as well as the discriminatory views of Canadian society meant that they were clustered in enclaves such as food, boot and shoe, garment making, and some service work.⁴²

³⁹Tamara Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch of Chinese Women and Work in British Columbia, 1858-1950," in Barbara Latham and Roberto Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria 1984).

⁴⁰Paula Hamilton, "Domestic Dilemmas: Representations of Servants and Employers in the Popular Press," in S. Magarey, S. Rowley and S. Sheridan, *Debutante Nation: Feminism Confronts the Nineties* (Sydney 1993), 71-90.

⁴¹Hargreaves, *Women at Work*, 127-8.

⁴²Franca Iacovetta, *"Such Hard Working People": Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montréal 1992).

The work options of native women were even more severely limited in both countries. Native girls in British Columbia were educated in the late-19th-century mission schools primarily to be domestics, but even this education was later discouraged as it was perceived that domestic jobs should be kept only for white, working-class girls, and that native women should restrict their work to the reserves. In seasonal work like the BC canneries, native women did supply a crucial form of seasonal, flexible, and cheap labour; again, as intermittent labourers, they were less likely to appear in the census. Their low wages were justified and indeed made possible because part of their basic subsistence was still secured through pre-capitalist means of production — the hidden economy of hunting and fishing.⁴³

The same was true for Aboriginal women in rural Australia, who received minuscule wages in comparison with whites, or no wages at all. In the earlier phases of occupation, Aboriginal women performed a wide range of men's work such as droving, fencing, clearing, road-making, well-sinking, shearing, and working on pearling luggers as well as traditional European women's work such as domestic service and nursing. As more men and boys of Aboriginal descent became available for the pastoral and maritime industries, women increasingly retreated to the traditional arena of household labour. The situation of indigenous women had many parallels with that of immigrant Pacific Island (Kanaka) women, who worked in the cane-fields of Queensland in the late 19th century but were largely confined to domestic service in the 20th. The labour of women of Aboriginal and Islander descent was increasingly utilized in the 20th century as white women abandoned domestic service for factory, shop, and office jobs. The official abduction of Aboriginal girls for training and assignment to white employers as domestic servants was widespread in Australia until the mid-1960s.

Thus, the dual process of racism and gender-segregation meant that native women and women of colour, who because of the marginal economic status of their families and communities had to engage in wage work, were banished to the lowest rungs of the occupational ladder. Black women in Ontario, who historically had a high labour force participation rate, were largely relegated to domestic and service work before World War II.⁴⁴ Similarly, since the late 19th century, working-class African-Canadian women in Nova Scotia had "virtually no legal, wage-earning opportunities outside domestic service, laundering and sewing." Racism reinforced class exploitation and was so deeply ingrained in the views of Nova Scotians that, as late as the 1920s, a white woman felt no compunction stopping an African

⁴³ Alicia Muszynski, "Race and Gender: Structural Determinants in the Formation of British Columbia's Salmon Cannery Labour Force," in Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology* (St. John's 1988), 103-20.

⁴⁴ Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto 1991).

70 WOMEN and WAGE LABOUR

Canadian stranger on the street and asking her "where she could get a good girl" to do her laundry!⁴⁵

This fracturing of the female work force on many lines serves as a cogent reminder that women workers are not a homogeneous group, but rather reflect varying, even conflicting experiences, shaped by their regional residence, race, ethnicity, or marital status. While this makes it difficult to isolate gender segregation in the workforce as the *only* factor shaping women's work lives, the sexual division of labour, as well as racial/ethnic divisions of labour, must still be a central foci of our critical analysis.

Explanations for the Sexual Division of Labour

Occupational segregation by sex in both Canada and Australia has been explained either with the more traditional liberal models used by some economists, or conversely, by neo-Marxist and feminist frameworks developed by historians and other social scientists. Many economists long believed, as Sylvia Ostry noted in her early studies of women in the Canadian labour force that "most women, unlike most men, are free to choose among many different types of activity: paid employment, leisure, volunteer work, work in the home."⁴⁶ Although few economists would now go to these liberal lengths, many theories still lay the blame on women's inadequate training or mistaken prejudices of employers. For example, human capital theories look to women's lower skills and education as explanations, or segmented labour theories focus on discriminatory practices of certain employers. In contrast, a more thorough-going structural analysis drawing on neo-Marxist and feminist theory has suggested that the material conditions, and in particular the capitalist organization of labour, have been essential to the continuing sex and racial segregation of the workforce. These theorists have increasingly attempted to take account of the way in which women's child bearing capacities, their familial roles, and a resilient ideology of sex difference have intersected with material conditions; they suggest that *both* the needs of capital and the material and ideological organization of the patriarchal family have shaped sex segregation over time. In Ann Curthoys' words, "the sexual division of labour arises from an interaction between bio-cultural tradition and practices on the one hand, and the specific institutions of capitalist production on the other."⁴⁷ Such theorists also note the potential for worker resistance to re-shape work and gender roles and while many neo-Marxist studies have concentrated on women's role in the labour force, they have also recognized the way in which women's domestic labour within the

⁴⁵Suzanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African Nova Scotian Women in Late 19th Century Halifax," in J. Guildford and S. Morton, eds., *Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th century Maritimes* (Fredericton 1994), 191.

⁴⁶Ostry, *The Female Worker in Canada*, 1.

⁴⁷Ann Curthoys, "Theories of the Sexual Division of Labour," *For and Against Feminism: A personal journey into feminist theory and history* (Sydney 1988), 127.

family has simultaneously sustained and reinforced their inequality within the workforce.

In reality, these theories are multiple, rather than unitary, as Marxists and feminists have debated the nature of domestic labour, the work process, the role of ideology and "patriarchy," to name only a few areas of contention. Without entering into all of these debates, we believe that it is most useful to conceive of women's segregated work, in the broadest theoretical terms, as a product of material structures and the interconnected systems of race and gender oppression: indeed, these are not separate systems, but are experienced by women as one, and each thread of the fabric takes on different meaning and importance according to the historical context.

How women actually dealt with sex segregation, lower wages, and difficult working conditions in these two national contexts may offer the most interesting and revealing comparisons between the two countries. We can now turn to questions of women's organization as women, their inclusion and exclusion from unions, and their resistance to the inequities of wage work.

Women's Organization/Women's Resistance 1880s-1920

In both Canada and Australia since the late 19th century women have joined together to make common cause over a variety of issues. In many cases, these issues have derived from women's specific productive and reproductive roles. In other cases, working-class women mobilized alongside men in defence of shared working-class causes. Since the late 19th century working women have been active at all levels of political activity, from workplace and union campaigns to community and parliamentary politics.

Early campaigns for female suffrage drew much of their support from the desire to protect wives and mothers from the violence and irresponsibility of husbands and to increase women's independence by supporting the extension of women's paid employment. Australian women, supported by liberal and labour organizations, won the vote in colonial/state legislatures between 1894 and 1908 and in the Federal arena in 1902. For Canadian women the struggle was to continue until 1919, with some provincial legislatures (notably Quebec) lagging far behind. While suffrage secured women an important individual right of citizenship, sun-dering the previous patriarchal notion that they were represented by the men in their families, it has been argued that male politicians conceded this victory when they realized that urban planning, labour efficiency, and moral reform, were not inimical to the existing power structures. Initially, in 1917, a restricted federal vote was extended to women of British origin who had relatives serving overseas, a cynical political manoeuvre designed to support the government's conscription policies. The suffrage movement divided over this first wartime vote with some civil libertarians, socialists, and labour women registering their opposition to such anti-democratic tactics: Their break with other suffragists both reflected existing

class divisions and foreshadowed the increasing convergence of socialist and labour women in Labour parties, union auxiliaries, and communist organizations in the post-war years.⁴⁸

Women also mobilized around class as well as feminist issues, playing a prominent role in the industrial conflict which accompanied the economic downturn in the 1890s. For instance, Australian women were active during the Maritime Strike of 1890, organizing relief and support for striking men, engaging in propaganda and direct action to win support for their cause, and shaming and intimidating strike-breakers. Less visible women's activities, such as providing moral support and practical domestic economy skills, strengthened the resolve of their striking menfolk.⁴⁹

From the 1880s, working-class women were also mobilizing into those labour organizations, few though they were, that could envision women not just as wives and mothers but also as workers. As part of the labour reform movement of the late 19th century, the Knights of Labor pledged themselves to better the lot of the woman worker, albeit within the framework of Victorian notions of femininity and masculinity. In Canada, where the Knights were more influential than Australia, women textile and shoe operatives, garment workers, a few domestic servants, and some shop clerks joined the organization which eschewed craft union principles in favour of industrial union strategies. Australian working women were also influenced by the Knights, who were active in such "new" unions as the Australian Workers' Union. Support was recruited amongst laundresses and domestic workers.⁵⁰ While the exact number of women involved in the Holy and Noble Order of the Knights is not known, the insistence that women were no less than men, that they could play important roles in the Knights, and deserved equal pay and treatment, flew in the face of contemporary convention.⁵¹

While the Knights were recruiting women to predominantly male unions, women were also forming their own unions. The first recorded women's union in Australia is the Victorian Tailoresses' Union, formed during a successful strike of clothing factory operatives in Melbourne in 1882-3. This strike was notable for the extensive support it elicited across class, gender, and ethnic lines: middle-class journalists, Jewish middle-men, and male trade unionists all lent practical and moral support to the striking women. Although this union and other women's unions established in the late 19th century were hard hit by the depression of the

⁴⁸ Carol Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto 1983).

⁴⁹ Bruce Scates, "Gender, Household and Community Politics: The 1890 Maritime Strike in Australia and New Zealand," *Labour History*, 61 (1991), 70-87.

⁵⁰ Bruce Scates, "'Faddists and Extremists': Radicalism and the Labor Movement, South Eastern Australia, 1880-1898," PhD thesis, Monash University, 1987, 222-3.

⁵¹ Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour 1800-1991* (Toronto 1992), 137.

1890s, the early 20th century saw a sudden flowering of women's unions and women unionists in mixed sex unions. These unions covered a range of women's urban employment, from clothing workers through to bookbinders, stationery employees, matchmakers, laundry workers, tobacco factory operatives, domestic servants, telegraphists, shop assistants, and clerks.⁵² The impetus for this organization came most directly from the newly established state wage-fixing bodies at both State and Federal level in the period 1896 to 1908.⁵³ The practical advantages to be gained by union organization for wages-board elections, sparked a revival of the almost defunct clothing trade unions in Victoria in 1896, while the requirement that unions be registered with the various arbitration courts before seeking their adjudication had a similar effect in other states and in fostering the formation of national unions.⁵⁴ The success of these unions in securing awards which considerably improved the wages and conditions of members reinforced this process. This was especially true of women's industries, which were traditionally hard to organize because of the prevalence of small workplaces, high labour turnover, victimization of unionists, and domestic pressures on female workers. The importance of the arbitration system in fostering unionism was apparent in the service sector as well as manufacturing, as Gail Reekie has shown for the Shop Assistants Union in New South Wales.⁵⁵

Large-scale mobilization of Canadian women workers also awaited the new century, with concerted drives to bring women garment workers into clothing trade unions just prior to 1914 and with more active and more broadly-based organizing during World War I.⁵⁶ If strikes are taken as a partial measure of women's

⁵²Edna Ryan, *Two-Thirds of a Man: Women and Arbitration in New South Wales 1902-08* (Sydney 1984); Melanie Raymond, "Labour Pains: Working-Class Women in Employment, Unions and the Labor Party in Victoria, 1880-1914," MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1987; Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work*; Melanie Nolan, "Uniformity and Diversity: A Case Study of Female Shop and Office Workers in Victoria 1880-1939," PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1989.

⁵³The Federal Government and four of the States (NSW, Western Australia, South Australia, and Queensland) adopted compulsory conciliation and arbitration courts while Victoria and Tasmania opted for wages boards which theoretically placed more emphasis on collective bargaining between representatives of employers and employees. The fact that the chairman had a casting vote, however, gave these boards arbitration powers in practice, and these were legally enforceable as were arbitration awards. "Introduction" to Stuart Macintyre and Richard Mitchell, eds., *Foundations of Arbitration: the Origins and Effects of State Compulsory Arbitration 1890-1914* (Melbourne 1989), 6-7.

⁵⁴Macintyre and Mitchell, *Foundations of Arbitration*, 15.

⁵⁵Gail Reekie, "The Shop Assistants' Case of 1907 and industrial relations in Sydney's retail industry," in Macintyre and Mitchell, *Foundations of Arbitration*, 275.

⁵⁶R. Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria 1880-1940* (Sydney 1993); Bradon Ellem, *In Women's Hands? A History of Clothing Trades Unionism in Australia* (Kensington 1989).

mobilization, then the garment trades stand out in Canada as a particularly fertile area of contestation in the first 2 decades of this century, accounting for nearly 37 per cent of strikes involving women.⁵⁷ If textile disputes are included, textile and garment strikes account for half of all strikes involving women, from 1900 to 1920. Strikes in the garment trades were particularly noticeable in the years before World War I as the clothing unions, buoyed by successes in the United States, launched concerted organizational drives in major Canadian centres in Ontario and Quebec.⁵⁸ While most garment strikes occurred in smaller establishments of less than 200 workers, the most famous Canadian clothing strike of the period occurred in 1912 among clothing workers employed by the large Toronto department store, Eaton's. Women accounted for approximately one-third of the Eaton's garment workers, many of whom were also Jewish. In contrast to the situation during the 1882-3 Melbourne Tailoresses' Strike, the four month struggle highlighted both gender and ethnic divisions within the working class as well as the limits of gender solidarity across classes. While the Jewish cloakmakers refused to take bread from their sisters' mouths, their refusal to do "women's work," which had sparked the dispute, paradoxically reinforced the gender division of labour within the trade. The trade union movement of Toronto, including some women's union auxiliaries, publicized the strike and solicited funds and strike support through a boycott of Eaton's; the boycott, however, was unsuccessful outside of the Jewish community, suggesting that the strike was perceived as one involving "foreigners." This latter perception was confirmed by the resistance noted among non-Jewish workers to joining the Toronto strike and in Montreal where a sympathy strike pitted Jewish women and men against French Canadian women who refused to participate. Similarly, attempts to interest middle and upper-middle class, Anglo-saxon suffragists in the cause were largely unsuccessful. Class and ethnic differences proved insurmountable barriers for the suffragists who feared that their cause might be damaged by association with the strike.⁵⁹ While the Eaton's strike ended in defeat, other garment strikes immediately before World War I were more successful, perhaps because a large number of smaller shops went out in unison and they were able to achieve at least some of their demands within a few days or weeks.

The coincidence of these two periods of mobilization raises questions about the extent to which the Australian situation can be entirely attributed to the effects of state wage-fixing bodies. Clearly arbitration did play an important part in focusing organizing efforts and providing legal validity to the existence of unions, but this was not the whole story. The general improvement in the economy from the late 1890s was also important, especially as this was accompanied by a shortage

⁵⁷Linda Kealey, *Women, Labour and the Left in Canada 1890-1920* (Toronto, forthcoming).

⁵⁸*Ladies Garment Worker*, February 1911.

⁵⁹Fragar, *Sweatshop Strife*; Alice Chown, *The Stairway* (New York 1921); *Lance* (Toronto) 30 March 1912.

of female labour in key manufacturing industries (such as clothing) by 1911. Also important was the desire of male unionists to organize women in order to control their entry into what the men saw as their legitimate occupations. The Victorian male bookbinders' union, for instance, having previously shown little interest in the question of women's wages and conditions, suddenly decided they had better take notice when the women formed their own union in 1911. Their president urged an amalgamation with the women's union in order, he said, "to strengthen our hands and the Girls could be educated as to how far they could do Bookbinding."⁶⁰ All industries which employed women exhibited this attitude to varying degrees, organizing women workers in order to claim equal pay on their behalf, not so much out of a sense of economic justice but in order to exclude them from men's jobs.⁶¹

The latter years of World War I also witnessed concerted efforts to organize women workers as wartime boom conditions and labour shortages provided more favourable circumstances for militant action. In Canada from 1915 to 1920 strikes in garments and textiles accounted for nearly one-third of labour disputes involving women workers, but new areas of women's employment also experienced strikes. Employers were often reluctant to employ women in heavy industry in Canada yet shortages of labour eventually opened the doors for some women in munitions and metal work, for example. As in the pre-war period, the presence of women in non-traditional jobs caused skilled male workers concern. The employment of 200 women at the Willys-Overland engine plant in Toronto in 1918, for example, resulted in a walkout by male employees who demanded that the women taking men's places should be paid men's wages. The week-long strike was settled with the acceptance of a wage schedule based on proficiency rather than the original demand for equal pay. Most of the women employed at the plant were classed as inspectors and received ten cents an hour less than the predominantly male "specialists." As in a number of other labour disputes, the demand for equal pay served as a trade-off to protect men's wages and was dropped in return for other concessions.⁶²

Many labour disputes occurred in more traditional sectors of women's work during and immediately after the war years, for example, in service and sales as well as manufacturing. An interesting feature of these strikes, in both Canada and Australia, was the alliance of white male and female workers against the employment of Chinese labour in the hotel and catering industries. For instance, a small strike of chambermaids at the Canadian Pacific Railway hotel in Vancouver in 1918 resulted in a wage hike and shortened hours, but when striking waiters joined the

⁶⁰Frances, *Politics of Work*, 117. This was also evident in the shop assistants' case above, in which the union sought unsuccessfully to exclude women from a range of "male" departments. Reekie, "The Shop Assistants' Case of 1907," 277-9.

⁶¹See for example, Frances, *Politics of Work*; Nolan, "Uniformity and Diversity"; Reekie, "The Shop Assistants' Case of 1907"; Ryan, *Two-thirds of a Man*.

⁶²Canada, Department of Labour, RG 27, vol. 308, strikes 84, 87.

women, the corporation threatened to replace the unionized chambermaids with cheaper Asian workers.⁶³ A similar case occurred in Western Australia in 1921, when female staff at the Esplanade Hotel in Fremantle went on strike against victimization of unionists. They quickly extended their grievances to include the employment of Asian labour which was threatening white male jobs.⁶⁴

The wartime industrial upheaval culminated in the New South Wales General Strike of 1917 and the labour revolt of 1919, felt with varying intensity across the regions of Canada. As Lucy Taksa has shown, working-class women as well as men participated in the New South Wales strike and women played an important part in the organization and public protests which accompanied the dispute.⁶⁵ Like their male counterparts, Canadian women workers demonstrated considerable militancy between 1917 and 1920, particularly in 1919. In addition to work stoppages in garments and textiles, communications, service and food industries, and printing, women were active and militant participants in a number of general strikes waged in the spring of 1919. The prairie city of Winnipeg, an industrial and rail centre, was the focal point of the General Strike which was announced by the walkout of 500 telephone workers on 15 May. Approximately 2,000 women were involved in the strike of some 30,000 workers, fighting for collective bargaining rights, a living wage, and against state repression of the labour movement. Telephone workers were joined by salesclerks, garment workers, waitresses, bookbinders, and confectionery workers led by the Women's Labour League (WLL), an organization of working-class wives and women workers. Under the leadership of Helen Armstrong whose husband was also a prominent strike leader, the WLL organized women workers into unions and took responsibility for strike support activities such as a dining room to feed the strikers during the six week dispute. While fulfilling more traditional support roles, Armstrong and the WLL also picketed and demonstrated as well as organizing defense efforts after the dramatic arrests of the male strike leaders. They also prevented men and women from going to work and attacked scabs. The arrests arising from Bloody Saturday on 21 June 1919 included women strike supporters. In the ensuing trials, the presiding magistrate denied that undue force had been used on Bloody Saturday and he specifically singled out the presence of women:

⁶³Canada, Department of Labour, RG 27, vol. 310, strike 180; University of British Columbia Special Collections, Hotel, Restaurant and Culinary Employees and Bartenders Union, Local 28, "Minutes," 6 January 1910-21 January 1921.

⁶⁴Wendy Brady, "'Serfs of the Sodden Scone'? Women Workers in the Western Australian Hotel and Catering Industry, 1900-1925," *Studies in Western Australian History*, 7 (December 1983), 38-9.

⁶⁵Lucy Taksa, "'Defence Not Defiance': Social Protest and the NSW General Strike of 1917," *Labour History*, 60 (1991), 16-33.

In these days when women are taking up special obligations and assuming equal privileges with men, it may be well for me to state now that women are just as liable to ill treatment in a riot as men and can claim no special protections and are entitled to no sympathy⁶⁶

Labour militancy was thus defined as masculine and women who presumed to step outside prescribed roles and behaved like men would lose their special privileges and protections. Implicitly working-class women were violating not only gender boundaries but also bourgeois notions of proper feminine behaviour.⁶⁷

As this case suggests, although the period from 1900 to the end of World War I saw a flowering of women's unionism and militancy, women continued to face a range of ideological and structural obstacles to equal participation with men in the labour movement. Unions generally lacked strategies to organize women workers, perhaps because of their reluctance to view women as anything but transient workers or members. Conventional wisdom held that women were destined for marriage and motherhood and thus only a short stint in the labour force. Attitudes toward women also conveyed firmly held convictions that women were more conservative, less willing to strike, and less militant. Since most unions at least began as craft organizations, it was difficult to envision a place for the less skilled workers. Political organizations also reflected some of these attitudes — women members were less valued, less revolutionary, and often joined because male family members were involved. Their contributions were acknowledged (as fundraisers, social organizers, auxiliary members), but definitely were viewed as secondary. Rather than examine women's potential contributions seriously, and make alterations in structures and attitudes, male unionists and political leaders generally relegated women to the ranks of the unorganizable or untrustworthy. Such practices failed to recognize the material obstacles — women workers were often younger, less skilled and experienced, and hampered by domestic duties — and the ideological forces that made participation for women more difficult. In the absence of recognition of these barriers and initiatives to attract women members specifically to union or party, it is no wonder that fewer women than men were attracted to labour and left-wing movements.⁶⁸

Despite these drawbacks, however, working-class women were far from passive or silent. As well as industrial organization, in the first few decades of this century working-class and socialist women in both countries also participated in women's labour leagues, consumer organizations, labour churches, study groups, "sewing" circles, and other ethno-cultural groups aimed at increasing women's

⁶⁶*Western Labor News*, 19 December 1919.

⁶⁷Linda Kealey, "'No Special Protection — No Sympathy': Women's Activism in the Canadian Labour Revolt of 1919," in D.R. Hopkin and G.S. Kealey, eds., *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850-1930* (Aberystwyth 1989), 134-59.

⁶⁸*Fragrant Sweatshop Strife*; Kealey, "Women, Labour and the Left"; Frances, *Politics of Work*; Scates, "Faddists and Extremists"; Joy Damousi, *Women Come Rally* (Melbourne 1994).

voices in the labour movement and on the left. The war and immediate post-war period sparked not only labour militancy but also served as a catalyst for various autonomous or semi-autonomous women's organizations aimed at alleviating women's unemployment, opposing conscription, enacting minimum wage legislation, demanding price controls and getting women elected to public office. Working-class and socialist women argued that women bore the costs of war while husbands, fathers, and brothers fought overseas. Wives of soldiers wrote letters to the editor asking how they and their families were to survive on meagre allowances especially when mothers of families were criticized for working outside the home. Some testified before royal commissions about the high cost of living and the frustration women felt when confronted with rising prices and inadequate incomes. No wonder, a number of witnesses exclaimed, that many were turning to socialism or some form of direct action in the current crisis.⁶⁹

Within the Canadian Jewish community protest in the form of boycotts built on ethnic solidarities such as that witnessed in the 1912 Eaton's strike. In Toronto in May 1917 Jewish women mounted a protest against Jewish bakers after the price of bread was raised, a move the women claimed was unnecessary given that the bakers had arranged a fixed price with the flour milling firms. Consumer strike leaders urged a boycott of the bakers, the home baking of bread, and in frustration, broke windows, raided bakeries and restaurants, and distributed purloined bread to the poor. Meanwhile, in Melbourne during August and September 1917, Socialist Party of Victoria organizer, Adela Pankhurst, led a large body of working-class women in a series of violent street demonstrations in protest against the rising cost of living, wartime profiteering, and food shortages. During August daily crowds of up to 8,000 women occupied the streets surrounding Parliament House, waving red ribboned umbrellas and demanding "food and fair play." By September the women were joined by thousands of men and the demonstrations turned into riots which targeted the premises of anti-union employers and food stockpilers.⁷⁰ Such actions paralleled the "communal strikes" over the high cost of food, fuel, and rent discussed by Kaplan in Europe and the consumer protests examined by Frank in the United States in the same period. Like their European and US counterparts, these Australian and Canadian women did not hesitate to organize themselves to protect the interests of family and to carry out their duties as housewives.⁷¹

⁶⁹Joy Damousi, "Socialist Women and Gendered Space: the Anti-Conscription and Anti-War Campaigns of 1914-18," *Labour History*, 60 (1991), 1-15; Judith Smart, "Feminists, Food and the Fair Price: The Cost of Living Demonstrations in Melbourne August-September 1917," *Labour History*, 50 (1986), 113-31. See also Kealey, "Women, Labour and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920."

⁷⁰Smart, "Feminists, food and the fair price."

⁷¹*Globe* (Toronto) 24-26 May; 28-30 May; 2, 11, 17 June 1917; Temma Kaplan, "Women and Communal Strikes in the Crisis of 1917-22," in R. Bridenthall, C. Koonz, S. Stuard, eds., *Becoming Visible*, 2nd ed. (1987), 429-49. Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-29* (Cambridge 1994).

Thus, women's mobilization in both Australia and Canada in the period before the 1920s was many faceted and often local in organization. While community-based, the issues raised and the demands put forward were by no means merely local, but rather spanned the breadth of concerns characteristic of working-class labour and socialist views. Women were active in the early part of this century, not only on the picket lines, but also in socialist politics, war-related campaigns such as anti-conscription, labour political action, consumer protest, and other forms of organization and action negotiated around the class, gender, and ethnic boundaries of their lives. Many of these themes were to persist in the inter-war period, though by World War II conditions had also been set for women's increased integration into trade unions.

With the successes of the suffrage movement in Canada during the war and post-war period, newly enfranchised women turned first to political action as a means of continuing to put working-class demands on the agenda, echoing a similar strategy employed by Australian women in the decades following their enfranchisement earlier in the century. "Women's vote had given us the club. Now we wanted women to use it," Helen Armstrong declared in Winnipeg in the fall of 1919 in the prelude to municipal and school board elections. Here, as elsewhere in Canada and Australia, labour and socialist women mounted the electoral platform to campaign for equal pay, collective bargaining rights, maternity allowances, old age and widows' pensions, free text books for schoolchildren, free health care, a shorter working day, and increased political organization among women. Female suffrage, however, did not secure women a representative share of political power. Women faced both prejudice against female candidates and material difficulties in obtaining nominations and conducting campaigns. With fewer opportunities and resources as well as less experience, only a few women succeeded in formal politics; most politically active women played far different roles at the local community level, supporting labour parties and lobbying for specific working-class causes.⁷²

1920s and 1930s

There is ample evidence of women's ongoing, though sporadic resistance to economic oppression during the 1920s and the Great Depression, although this often centred on their work as homemakers as much as their work as wage labourers. Many women engaged in strike support for their husbands and brothers, and in relief protests, trying to secure more adequate welfare for their families and

⁷²Kealey, "Women, Labour and the Left"; *Industrial Banner* (Toronto) 4, 25 April 1919; Craig Heron, "Working-Class Hamilton, 1895-1930," PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1981, 466-9. Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left 1920-50* (Toronto 1989), ch. 2. Joy Damousi, "Marching to Different Drums: Women's Mobilisations 1914-39," in Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans, eds., *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation* (Sydney 1992), 350-75.

an end to the humiliation of state-issued relief vouchers. Women were also prominent in neighbourhood and community-based protests: they participated in eviction struggles and often led consumer-based protests over prices, like the one by Jewish housewives in Toronto against escalating butchers' prices. This homemaker-led protest by women was similar to their war-time campaign over bread prices, and such tactics remained a key method of organizing working-class women, even in the post-World War II years, as communists (in both Australia and Canada) created women-centred campaigns to force the state to control profits and prices.

There is also evidence of women's attempts to unionize and struggles within the workplace in the 1920s and 1930s, but these struggles were often limited, not by women's passivity, but by overwhelming structural barriers to lasting organization. Despite heroic attempts by Canadian communists to unionize domestic workers in large cities, these nascent unions faltered in the face of a massive labour supply, opposition by employers, and the scattered nature of the labour force. Women in canning factories, garment making, and food production sometimes engaged in spontaneous protests over difficult and deteriorating working conditions, occasionally encouraged by socialist and communist organizers, but they also often faced defeat. A wave of protest swept through the textile industry in Ontario and Quebec in the late 1930s, for example, as both male and female workers protested years of wage stagnation and speed ups in the industry. In many small cities where there were textile mills, however, attempts to organize unions which would have included women floundered, not only because of the active intimidation by employers, determined to maintain their competitive edge with a low wage bill, but also by the lack of legal protection for collective bargaining and the federal and provincial governments' open antipathy to unions, exemplified by their use of provincial police against strikers.

The Australian arbitration system between the wars provided unionists with more protection against intimidation, but the long-term effects of arbitration on women's unionism were complicated by the gender politics within unions at this time. It was to women's advantage to belong to a strong, national union if they wished to take advantage of the awards of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, and this period saw the emergence of several strong industrial unions covering areas of high female employment such as the clothing and printing industries. But the price of belonging to these organizations was usually that women's concerns were marginalized, subordinated to the interests of the male members who dominated union hierarchies and decision-making processes.⁷³ Like Canadian women, women unionists in Australia encountered deep-seated gender ideologies which continued to retard their full integration into the union movement on equal terms with men.

Aside from an indignant rhetoric over women's working conditions, neither Canadian nor Australian trade unions devoted much energy to their unionization

⁷³ See Frances, *Politics of Work*, for instances of this in the clothing and printing industries.

in the 1930s. They did not see the unemployed woman worker as the problem during the Depression; many unionists did not see women as permanent, life-long wage earners, or as equal comrades in struggle. This image of women workers needing temporary protection rather than skilled jobs, and the strong adherence to the ideal of a family wage within the union movement existed in both Canada and Australia. Indeed, despite the advantages accorded to Australian women by the arbitration system, particularly in terms of union recognition, one might argue that ultimately, the resilience of an ideology of natural sex difference justifying occupational segregation and the intense commitment of unions to a family wage ideal was the more important defining factor for both countries in shaping the lives of women workers — not the different legal regimes.

A further similarity in the interwar period was the racial and ethnocentric biases of the labour movements in Australia and Canada. On the one hand, ethnic solidarity could be an important factor encouraging women's organization into unions. Ruth Frager's ground-breaking work on Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the Toronto garment industry makes this point emphatically. Indeed, she argues that Jewish women were encouraged to join unions and left-wing organizations more by their class exploitation and common experiences of anti-Semitism than by their understanding of gender inequality.⁷⁴ On the other hand, ethnic and racial exclusion also characterized the labour movement. Attitudes to Australian Aboriginal workers hardened in the inter-war period, with unions that had formerly welcomed their membership now formally excluding them.⁷⁵ In Canada, one example of protective legislation supported by many unions and given considerable attention in the 1920s (but less by later historians), was the proposal to ban white women from working in Chinese establishments, the premise being that these women might be corrupted, either sexually or through contact with drugs. There was no concern expressed for the exclusion of Asian and black women from many jobs, and indeed unions often supported an anti-Asian exclusionary immigration policy, not only because of fears of economic competition, but also because of long-standing racist fears and traditions in the union movement. Even the more radical Canadian Communist Party, though aware of anti-Semitism and ethnic exclusion, was far less vocal about issues of race, concentrating in their newspapers on anti-imperialist struggles abroad, rather than the immediate colonization of native peoples in Canada. The shocking practice of de facto segregation of blacks in housing, recreation, and work remained a non-issue with labour until more recent times. This contrasts with the situation in Australia before World War II, where the Communist Party of Australia was one of the few voices opposing the oppression of Aboriginal people through the country.

⁷⁴Frager, *Sweatshop Strife*.

⁷⁵Ray Frances, Bruce Scates and Ann McGrath, "Broken Silences? Labour History and Aboriginal Workers," in T. Irving, *Challenges to Labour History* (Sydney 1994), 189-211.

A further similarity between the two countries in the inter-war period was the mobilization of rural women. In Canada, farm women, particularly on the prairies, joined organizations like the Women's Grain Growers, and the Women's sections of the United Farmers of Canada, articulating demands for better working conditions for women on farms, as well as for policies such as tariff reductions, cooperative marketing, and relief in the 1930s to aid farmers in general. Those women who found their way into the early Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) often developed a radical critique of capitalism and the organization of production for profit, as well as feminist demands for more equality within the socialist movement, welfare specifically for widows and single mothers, access to birth control, and promotion of peace instead of a wasteful, militarized economy. This intense radicalization of Western rural women, however, was concentrated in the inter-war and Depression years, though in the post-World War II period, many prairie women committed to social democratic parties. Australian farm women, especially those on the soldier settlement schemes, also mobilized in the 1920s and 1930s in the face of desperate working hours and conditions, often undertaken on marginal farming land. As Marilyn Lake argues, the mobilization of women "was arguably a significant force behind the growth of the Country Party and the shaping of its policy, as well as a major factor behind the decision of many soldier settler families to quit the land."⁷⁶ The aim of the Victorian Farmers' Union was to secure "Australian prices" for farm produce so as to secure a living wage for farmers and their working men and so end the slavery of farm women. In this, the demands echoed those of the urban labour movement of which many of the rural activists had been members.

World War II and After

The union struggles of the 1930s, however ethnocentric, limited, and fractured, nevertheless began to lay the basis for women's inclusion in the trade union movement and for the growth of industrial unions, which broke down the stranglehold of craft unionism on the labour movement. In Canada, these unions gained a small measure of legal protection from the federal government during and after World War II. They provided a crucial tool — perhaps only a potential one to begin with — for the mobilization of women in mass production industries like meat packing, automobile assembly, and electrical goods, and later in service work. The mass movement of women into the paid workforce in Australia during the war also gave a new impetus to industrial organization, especially as it provided many women with the opportunity to work in non-traditional occupations and gain experience in more organized workplaces. As in Canada, this experience carried over into post-war unionization.

⁷⁶Marilyn Lake, *The Limits of Hope: Soldier Settlement in Victoria 1915-38* (Melbourne 1987), 190-3.

World War II also precipitated changes in the response of Australian Aboriginal workers, both men and women, many of whom received wages for the first time during the war. The post-war period saw an increasingly effective organized resistance to forced labour, especially in rural industries. Aboriginal women workers participated in industrial disputes such as the 1946 Pilbara Pastoral Strike, the 1968 walk-off from Wave Hill Station, and the 1973 Wee Waa Aboriginal cotton chippers' strike. And as Huggins and Goodall have pointed out, Aboriginal women also played an important role in the union movement by attempting to link and support the growing number of Aborigines in public sector jobs.⁷⁷

Gaining an equal place in the labour movement, however, was not an easy task for women, whatever their ethnic background. As Pamela Sugiman points out, women were a ghettoized minority in the growing auto industry. They had second-class seniority status and they were discriminated against if they were married. Drawing on gender solidarity at work (often the result of their segregation in the plants), these women slowly began to organize. Using union committees and structures, they demanded equal access to jobs within the workplace, and they pushed the union to take up issues like equal pay. They astutely drew on a long-standing union rhetoric of equity and fairness to try to overturn gender discrimination within the union; they challenged, sometimes only gingerly, union leaders to make good their verbal commitment to fraternity and equality.⁷⁸ In the 1950s and 1960s, however, the political critique of many union women stopped short of a concerted feminist analysis of male power in the public and private spheres, for activist union women were also class-conscious workers who absorbed a union ideology of common class exploitation and class solidarity. With some difficulty, union women struggled to balance their own working-class feminism with their loyalty to a movement which was still masculinist in its outlook and ideals. The anti-communist purges in the Cold War undoubtedly made this an even more difficult struggle for many union women, as those unions which tended to have a more radical position on gender issues were also those suspected of communist sympathies.

The other two major changes facilitating more active involvement of women in the labour movement in the post-war years were the growing number of women in the workforce, and also increased unionization in the service sector and especially the public sector, which automatically drew in many new women workers. For example, by the 1960s one of the fastest growing unions was the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which organized women working in a vast number of workplaces such as libraries, nursing homes, government services,

⁷⁷M. Goodell and J. Huggins, "Aboriginal Women are Everywhere: Contemporary Struggles," in K. Saunders and R. Evans, eds., *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation* (Sydney 1992), 407.

⁷⁸Pamela Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-1979* (Toronto 1994).

non-profit organizations, daycares, and so on. This union also became a vocal proponent of legal reform such as maternity leave, non-discrimination legislation, and pay equity, as well as a recruiting ground for women activists and leaders for the wider labour movement.

The increased unionization of women by the 1970s and their subsequent campaigns for equality within unions thus emerged from the major structural changes occurring in the labour force and in the new family wage economy, by the broadening of the union movement, as well as by the ideals and rhetoric of the larger feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Increasingly, the contradictions between those ideals on the one hand, and union practices and organization on the other, compelled some working women to demand changes both in the workplace and in their unions.

In the last resort, it was women's politicization and their determination to use the union movement, not only to fight for economic security, but also for gender equality that altered the fact of the labour movement. Women's resistance, shaped by their experience and awareness of class, racial, and gender inequalities was expressed in part by their attempts to turn to the state for help in altering their work lives. Although they were often frustrated and dissatisfied with the results, women nonetheless attempted to secure state intervention as one more means to gain dignity in their working lives.

Playing the State

Both Australian and Canadian women have attempted to use state structures to regulate and equalize workplace relations, as well as to provide services, such as child care, to aid women workers. Australian women have probably had more success with this tactic — hence their invention of the very term “playing the state” — in the later 20th century due to their close connection to Labor governments especially at the federal level (and traditional alliances between the ALP and the union movement). At the same time, many Australian feminists are also critical of a misplaced confidence that the state, as it is constructed now, can liberate working women, either through reform measures or women's active participation in state bureaucracies. Like many socialists, these feminists are skeptical of a state apparatus truly acquiescent to the needs of labour, rather than accommodating capital; they are also critical of the underlying masculinist and racist ideologies underpinning both the workings of the state and indeed, the historical construction of the very image of “nation” in both Canadian and Australia.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Ann Curthoys, “Feminism, Citizenship and the National Identity,” *Feminist Review*, 44 (Summer 1993). See Marilyn Sawer, *Sisters in Suits: Women and Public Policy in Australia* (Sydney 1990) for a sympathetic view of playing the state. For a more critical view see Anna Yeatman, *Bureaucrats, Technocrats, Femocrats: Essays on the Contemporary Australian State* (Sydney 1990) and Rosemary Pringle and Sophie Watson, “Women's Interests and the Post-Structuralist State,” in Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips, eds., *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Debates* (Stanford 1992).

Nonetheless, trade unionists, even the more radical socialist and feminist ones, have tried to play the state throughout the 20th century as one means of securing better conditions and wages for working women. While these efforts may have met with limited successes, such campaigns have been used to educate and mobilize working women in particular crisis moments. They have also created shifting coalitions between trade unions, women's organizations, and the Australian Labour Party (ALP) (and in Canada the social-democratic New Democratic Party [NDP]), which reveal much about the changing ideology and make up of those movements.

During and after World War I, one of the most important campaigns endorsed by Canadian trade unionists was the crusade to secure minimum wages for women. This was a logical conclusion to a long tradition of protective factory legislation designed to regulate the health, hours, and places where women and children could labour. This tradition assumed the importance of protecting women's reproductive function and saw women's interests as workers subordinate to their role in the family. Though it was assumed women's physical weakness required extra protection, it was concurrently assumed that their actual monetary needs were far less than men's, given women's transitory link to the labour force.⁸⁰

Already a firm part of regulatory machinery in Australia, wage regulation came to most Canadian provinces in the aftermath of World War I (and primarily, though not exclusively, for women) as some governments became sympathetic to laws which would reduce labour tension as well as regulate business competition. In Manitoba the campaign was led by labour groups, including the Women's Labour League, although in Ontario, more middle-class women's organizations like the National Council of Women took the lead. These women reformers were intent on protecting the health and morality of women workers. The male-led union movement heartily endorsed similar aims which also saw its role as that of paternal protector of women workers. A sexual division of labour was taken for granted by both groups and as a result, it was felt that women's ghettoized work in areas such as garment making had to be guarded against the worst ravages of wage reduction and physical exploitation; male unionists also wanted reassurance that a cheapening of women's wages would not have the same result for their wages. Although some working women voiced the realistic fear that employers would circumvent a legislated minimum with tactics such as new piece rates, female trade unionists and labourites generally supported the concept, sometimes using the same rationale as middle class feminists that women's reproductive health and thus the "future generations" should be insured with this legislation.⁸¹

⁸⁰Linda Kealey, "Women and Labour During World War I: Women Workers and the Minimum Wage," in Mary Kinnear, ed., *First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History* (Regina 1987), 79.

⁸¹Margaret McCallum, "Keeping Women in their Place: The Minimum Wage in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (1986), 37.

The problem with this effort to play the state, however, lay first, in the modified and weak legislation actually secured after business had its say in its creation. When the Depression set in, employers found a multitude of ways to avoid the law, occasionally even firing women to hire lower-paid men who had no minimum wage. Even more crucial was the underlying ideological legacy of these bills, secured in province after province: the concept of a minimum reinforced an image of women as dependent and secondary earners, and did little to break down the ghettoization of women in low-wage jobs. Protective legislation, as a whole, concludes Margaret Hobbs, could "result in outright discrimination against women's employment" and whatever its good intentions, "proved inextricably intertwined with domination."⁸² And as Swain and Howe point out in the Australian context, protective legislation was part of a wider movement for social reform which originated in the middle classes. The kind of legislation arising from this movement often had clear class implications, most notably the exclusion of domestic servants from any protection against exploitation and physical injury.⁸³ Protective legislation had even more serious racial implications. While white women supported factory legislation which protected their health and safety in the workplace and their ability to bear healthy children, Aboriginal women struggled against oppressive protection acts which controlled where they could live and work or confined them in sub-standard housing on reserves and missions where they were fed an inadequate and unappealing diet. The white state decided who they could marry and often took their children away from them.

Underlying these very early campaigns to pressure the state to provide a modicum of protection for exploited women workers lay a social analysis of women's exploitation which took for granted concepts of physical and natural sexual difference (including women's "weaker" constitution) and assumed the need to protect women's reproductive roles, as well as their future domestic and maternal roles. Indeed, even socialist and communist women organizing in the inter-war period took some of these same suppositions for granted, although they also believed that women had a claim to economic security and independence. These gender assumptions in turn operated within a racist framework based on eugenicist theory which shaped the demands of working-class women. For example, in the early 20th century, Australian Labor women were influential in deciding the platform on childhood endowment and maternity allowances, but their criteria

⁸²Margaret Hobbs, "'Dead Horses' and 'Muffled Voices': Protection Legislation, Education and the Minimum Wage for Women in Ontario," MA Thesis, University of Toronto, 1985, 98.

⁸³Renate Howe and Shurlee Swain, "Fertile grounds for divorce: sexuality and reproductive imperatives," in K. Saunders and R. Evans, eds., *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation* (Sydney 1992), 172-3.

of eligible mothers excluded the thousands of Aboriginal and Melanesian women who needed it most.⁸⁴

A more liberal, individualistic, equal rights approach to women's secondary status as workers, which pointed to women's equal abilities, but unequal access to jobs, increasingly drew support in the 1940s and especially after World War II. This liberal perspective, which demanded that the state liberate women workers by ensuring equality of opportunity and women's similar treatment to men, never commanded the same ideological and organizational power that it did in the United States women's movement. In Canada, trade union women and sometimes socialists were more likely to participate in uneasy but pragmatic alliances with more liberal, feminist groups like the Business and Professional Women. The latter stressed an equal rights approach to gender equality in the workforce rather than embracing the anti-capitalist analysis and class-based coalitions embraced by trade union and CCF women, but on some issues — such as the right of married women to even *have* jobs — these two groups thought alike, and became allies in the 1940s and 1950s.

What is revealing, however, is the way in which trade union women's attempts to play the state gradually took on a new character by the 1960s. As Ann Curthoys notes in the Australian case, the women's movement in the early and mid 20th century was more inclined to stress the need to equalize opportunity for women workers and also supported some forms of family endowment to give mothers the resources to sustain their families by staying out of the workforce. Conversely, the male-dominated trade union movement remained wedded to an ideal of a family wage and stressed higher male wages as the desired end, although they also supported the unionization and protection of working women in their own separate spheres of wage work. In Canada, there was a similar gap between more liberal feminist organizations and the union movement, with the latter unable to question a sexual division of labour in the workplace or abandon its long-time commitment to the ideal of a family wage.

By the 1960s and 1970s this was changing, and the gulf between feminist and union positions was breaking down in both countries. For instance, Canadian unions appearing before the federal Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1967 (admittedly more progressive or female-dominated ones) stressed married women's right to work, the need to accept two-income families, and women's right to better training so their job choices could be widened. Some also noted women's right to reproductive choices. The feminist and union rapprochement was also symbolized in the 1970s by organizational attempts (often by socialist feminists) to create alliances between the union movement and feminist groups, often around

⁸⁴R. Frances, "Shifting Barriers: Twentieth Century Women's Labour Patterns," in Saunders and Evans, *Gender Relations*, 121 and M. Lake, "The Independence of Women and the Brotherhood of Man. Debates in the Labour Movement over Equal Pay and Motherhood Endowments in the 1920s," *Labour History*, 63 (1993), 1-24.

the concrete struggles of women workers. In the predominantly women's strike at Fleck Manufacturing in 1979, for instance, feminist organizations like the International Women's Day Committee mobilized support for union women who were articulating their own particular vision of working-class feminism through their demands for better wages and their militancy on the picket line.⁸⁵

Unionized women workers were now more numerous and diverse, both in terms of ethnicity and race (as immigration patterns changed), and in terms of occupation, as public sector and service workers unionized as well. Women, in fact, were unionizing at a faster pace than men. Ideologically, these newly unionized workers were influenced both by liberal and socialist feminist thinking, as well as by their daily participation in workplace struggles and by the economic realities of the pooled family wage economy. They rejected the labour movement's long-standing investment in a male family wage and promoted a trenchant critique of natural sex difference as a rationale for women's ghettoization in the workforce. Emboldened by their increased numbers and solidarity within the labour movement, these women began to demand changes from within the house of labour at the same time that they cautiously explored alliances with feminist groups to play the state in pursuit of better wages and conditions.

In doing so, they drew in part on liberal feminist discourse — that is, their right to the same treatment and jobs as men — but also on a more thoroughgoing social analysis of inequality which challenged the existing sexual division of labour (through women's access to non-traditional work), demanded a re-thinking of how skill and value were defined in the workplace (in pay equity campaigns), and also laid claim to protection for women's reproductive role without the concomitant discrimination which had always followed with protective legislation.⁸⁶ This is not to say that no tensions exist between feminist and trade union groups, for they clearly do. Nor has the union movement been easily and or in any way completely won over to feminist issues or highly democratic methods of organizing; as Briskin and McDermott show in *Women Challenging Unions* much resistance remains in these areas.⁸⁷ At the same time, an ideological shift in the outlook of both unions and the women's movement has transpired. The major women's organization, the National Action Committee, for instance, has political and organizational ties to the Canadian Labour Congress and is wedded to a similar, social-democratic analysis of the state which critiques the state's anti-labour, pro-capital agenda, while placing some hope in reformist legislation as a cure for gender inequality. Similar changes have occurred in Australia, where women unionists are playing a

⁸⁵ Heather J. Maroney, "Feminism at Work," *New Left Review*, 141 (1983) and Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement* (Toronto 1983).

⁸⁶ Tom Langford, "Strikes and Class Consciousness," *Labour/Le Travail*, 34 (1994).

⁸⁷ Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, "Introduction," to their edited collection *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy* (Toronto 1993).

major role in the country's unions, symbolized by the election of Jenni George as a first female president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1995.⁸⁸

But can one say that this tactic of playing the state, in either Canada or Australia, has yielded significant results for working women? Where a sympathetic Labour or social democratic government has been in power, organized working women have been able to secure some gains, including state bureaucracies contributing research aid and organizing funds to labour causes, or reformist legislation, like pay equity legislation, or the limited support for child care offered by the ALP government in Australia. But there have been also significant setbacks from these governments, as the recent and shocking abrogation of collective bargaining rights under the Ontario NDP's infamous "Social Contract" illustrates only too well. A longer term reading of this tactic in Canada may suggest that the success of labour legislation is related in part to the political sympathies of the incumbent government, but also to other pressures by the national and international economy and the demands of private enterprise.

In both countries, working women may find that the age old tactic of workplace and community organizing yields just as much in the long run as a direct appeal to the state. The most important gains women have made by pressuring the state may be the ongoing radicalization and mobilization of working women around equality issues, as much as the legislative gains secured. The failure of Canadian trade union and NDP women to play the state in comparison to their Australian sisters is in part a result of the different division of powers in both countries and the lack of any powerful allies at the federal level.

Overall, though, activists in both countries might agree that attempts to play the state have not been effective in altering the major structural problems shaping the choices of women workers. Nor is there any sign that this will change in the current context of globalization, reduction of social programs, and planned unemployment. All that can be hoped for, as Ann Curthoys points out, is that such efforts, while leaving the major features of masculine and economic power unassailed, may in the long run challenge its legitimacy.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Anna Booth and Linda Rubenstein, "Women in Trade Unions in Australia," in Sophie Watson, ed., *Playing the State: Australian Feminist Interventions* (Sydney 1990), discusses the increasing influence of feminists within the union movement since the 1960s.

⁸⁹ Ann Curthoys, "Feminism, Citizenship and National Identity," *Feminist Review*, 44 (1993), 113.