This edition of the Workers Solidarity Bulletin acknowledges the Women in Male Dominated Occupations and Industries (WIMDOI) conference being held in Devonport, Tasmania over the three days of 12 to 14 November. According to the comrades in WIMDOI, they are expecting about 150 women from 27 unions to participate. In this edition, we remember that it was women in the meat industry – a male dominated industry – that fought for and pioneered the first equal pay test case. But the battle wasn’t won in the courts. It got there after two decades of industrial organising and campaigning. Read on for more.

As always, Workers Solidarity welcomes your feedback, please get in touch:

we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

Maldito Perrito (instagram @malditoperrito)
The Chilean “riot dog” was famous for participating in anti-government protests, and is now a mascot for the current protests, which have widespread trade union support in Chile.

PFA (Professional Footballers Australia)
The Matildas

After years of discontent, the Australian women’s soccer team – the Matildas – have had a significant victory around their pay and conditions, with both the Football Federation of Australia and the players’ union claiming to have closed the pay gap between the men and women’s national teams. The new four year agreement ensures the Socceroos and the Matildas receive a 24% share of an agreed aggregate of national team generated revenues in 2019-20, which will increase by 1% each year. Additionally, a new contract system will see the Matildas earn annual salaries from $66,000 to $100,000 – the same amount as the top Socceroos. This is a massive increase from the $21,000 per annum the Matildas were reportedly earning when they last went on strike in 2015. The Matildas will also take home an increased proportion of prize money should they be successful at the World Cup. The Matildas will also now access the same off-field benefits as the Socceroos including business-class flights, training facilities and support staff. There will also be a review of leave policies, particularly around maternity leave. Current Matilda Elise Kellond-Knight said: “This new deal is enormous. As a female footballer, it’s what we’ve always dreamed of. We’ve always wanted to be treated equal. We want to be able to step out on to that pitch with equal opportunity and with equal facilities that men have been exposed to… It’s a sign of respect and opportunity.”

ASU – Warrnambool City Council Workers

Council workers in Warrnambool are taking industrial action in an attempt to get a pay rise. Workers are demanding 2% or $30 a week – whichever is greater, which would translate to an additional $6 per day for the lowest paid workers covered by the agreement. Recent EBAs at neighbouring shire councils have seen comparable payrises for workers. Moyne and Southern Grampian shires negotiated a 2% increase, and...
the Pyrenees Shire negotiated 2.1%. The Warrnambool City Council has recently been beset with allegations of financial mismanagement, and workers feel that while Councillors are wining and dining on ratepayers money, the lowest paid workers who keep the city clean and running are being denied a fair payrise. At this stage, the industrial action being taken is work bans including not collecting rubbish, and not mowing parks and reserves in the city. Further industrial action could be taken, including bans on collecting and disposing of dead animals, issuing infringement notices and possible 24 hour stoppages. ASU Branch Secretary Lisa Darmainn commented “if that means the CEO is out cleaning public toilets and picking up dead animals until he agrees to a minimum $30 pay rise per week, that’s fine with me.”

IEU(QLD/NT) - Catholic Schools Qld

More than 195 Catholic schools in Queensland will be affected by work bans next week with more than 7000 teachers ramp up industrial action from 7 November. Negotiations between the union and the Queensland Catholic Education Commission started in March, but the Commission has failed to satisfy the union’s demands around workload, work security and wage parity with the state sector. The work bans will initially include not attending staff meetings, banning duties during scheduled meal breaks, banning supervision lessons or covering period, banning playground and transport supervision, and not complying with employer requests for data collection or analysis. The option for a full strike remains on the table. 90% of IEU members who voted endorsed the industrial action. The IEU says it needs to see real measures taken by the Commission to address workload, work intensification and casualisation, and a commitment to maintain pay parity between the state and Catholic sectors. IEU members in Queensland last went on strike in 2016.

AMWU - DTS Food Technologies

AMWU members at DTS Food Laboratories in Melbourne took a 24 hour stoppage on Monday 4th November. EBA negotiations have broken down several times, and the workers have decided protected action is the only way forward. Many of the workers are tertiary educated, and all are highly skilled, yet many earn only $25 an hour. The employer is refusing to pay little more than award wages, and refusing to agree to any claims around backpay. Workers have voted down the agreement three times, but DTS steadfastly refuses to improve their offer, they even called the cops on a peaceful, protected action BBQ. DTS bosses also said workers’ poor pay was their “choice” for working at DTS. The dispute will continue, for updates go to:

https://www.facebook.com/amwuvic

BWTUC - Cambodia

126 skilled workers restoring the West Mebon temple in Cambodia have been out of work for a year. They were previously employed by the French archaeological agency EFEO, with a collective agreement and good working conditions. But in February 2018 they learned they would be suspended and then transferred to the Cambodian Government agency APSARA, which has a history of union-busting. They were told there is not enough money to employ all of them according to their previous agreement. Now unskilled workers have been hired to do their work and already there are reports of improper payments. The West Mebon workers are proud of their role in restoring Cambodia’s cultural heritage, but deserve dignity and respect in their work.

You can sign the Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia’s petition at Labor Start:

https://www.labourstartcampaigns.net/show_campaign.cgi?c=4153

BACKBONE OF OUR MOVEMENT

Hannah Matthewson / CFMMEU Delegate at Hutchison Ports, Port Botany

How long have you been a union member? I’ve been a member of the MUA for 6 years now, dating back to the day I first stepped on the waterfront as a 22 year old young female.

Why did you join the union? I first joined the union off the back of experienced waterfront workers on the first day I walked through the gates. These workers explained the importance of the history and previous struggles that had won us the conditions that I was lucky enough to come across.

What’s your best memory/story about being in the union movement? Three years into working on the wharves, half of the terminal was sacked via text msg at midnight. It would have been one of the most emotionally straining times in
my life. We spent 137 days on a picket outside the terminal gates. My sister and father were both sacked as well.

The best memories we made there and the day I walked back through the gate after months of struggle will be one I will never forget. Without the unions and international solidarity from other unions I wouldn’t be where I am today.

What’s the most important issue facing the union movement today? The most important issue facing this modern era is automation. A constantly developing world puts all workers at risk of being replaced by robots. We have seen steady job removal from multiple industries including my own.

Only through collective bargaining and securing things like our right to strike will we ever be able to truly combat this extremely concerning issue.

Why should people join their union? It’s because of collective bargaining and worker protests that some work forces today enjoy the right to argue for wage increases, access to decent super, and improved working conditions within the workplace among many other achievements. People should join to keep alive healthy living arrangements within Australia and the world.

In 1969 the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) took the Meat and Allied Trades Federation of Australia (MATFA) to court to fight for equal pay for women. The case was the first of its kind. The decision that when women perform the work of men, they should receive the same payment as men was a significant win for the AMIEU. But the ruling that equal pay should not be provided where the work is essentially or usually performed by females was a loss for many women in other industries. Unions have been fighting for equal pay ever since, and the fight is not over.

Like any case that ends up in the courts, an industrial battle preceded the victory. It’s the story of this battle that is worth remembering, as our comrades meet in Devonport for the WIMDOI conference 2019.

Initially only men worked in the meat industry. Solo slaughterers performed work that was physically heavy, highly skilled and extremely dangerous. Butchers’ unions and meat labourers’ unions were formed in each of the colonies on Terra Australis in the 19th Century and in 1906, the AMIEU was formed by federation.

/ Women and men across the Australian labour movement participated in rallies, stop works, demonstrations, and other industrial activities to bring about equality in wages between the sexes /

The Harvester judgement of 1907 set a minimum wage for unskilled labourers of 2 pounds, 2 shillings per week – the amount an average worker paid for food, shelter and clothing for a man, his wife and three children. Women workers were not covered by the minimum wage.

In the 1912 Fruit Pickers Case, the court considered for the first time the question of how the Harvester ‘living’ or ‘family’ wage would be applied to women. It decided that women should not receive a family wage,
because they were not under an obligation to support a family, but instead should receive a ‘living’ wage if they were working in jobs performed almost exclusively by women, such as fruit packing or millinery.

The concepts of skilled work, women’s work and men’s work are social constructions. They allow for discrimination and difference in “value” based on who is performing the job. Men’s jobs are those activities that require physical strength. Women’s activities, those typically requiring caring skills have been regarded as requiring less skill than those jobs requiring strength. The consequence of regarding certain jobs as women’s work and others as men’s work has been an undervaluing of women’s skills and work and ongoing reinforcement of allocation on the basis of sex. It sets up a rivalry between men and women workers, rather than a battle between workers and the boss. So the driving down of wages might be seen as a problem of women entering the workforce, rather than a constructed view of whose labour is more valuable.

During WWI, women worked in red meat as cashiers and in canning and during the Depression, women’s labour started to dominate in the canneries. Women worked 47 hours to earn 2.5 days of men’s wages – that’s two hours for every hour that a man worked, to earn the same amount. Women were effectively brought in to drive down wages in the industry.

The 1930s saw the introduction of the chain system, mechanising the process and increasing production significantly. One major impact was to challenge the industrial strength of the slaughterers. It also allowed women into more areas of the meat industry and the exploitation of women drove down wages even further so by the 1940s.

The AMIEU started to try to recruit women into the union. Stella Nord, a married woman meat worker in Queensland during the 1950s and 1960s, was sponsored by the QLD branch of the AMIEU to tour the QLD meat works in order to educate workers, women and men alike, about the equal pay campaign. She was often met with protests from some right wing elements within the union movement, namely from the industrial Groupers, also known as the National Civic Council (NCC).

The issue of equal wages arose in the 1940s when increasing numbers of women were employed in the industry in a range of jobs during and after WWII, ranging from pre-packing to boning and butchering, trimming and slicing. The union started to form Equal Pay Committees across the country, and these persisted right up until the 60s and 70s.

In the 1940s, the Victorian Equal Pay Committee said,

"...we stand by the democratic right of any individual to choose who they hire, but if women work then they must be paid equally with men. That is the rate for the job."

It should be noted too, that the union’s equal pay campaign wasn’t just limited to wages; it also included the demand of gender blind recruitment and the right of married women to work.

In fact, much of the AMIEU’s campaigning throughout the 1950s was around women’s right...
to work. In 1958, the union’s Equal Pay Committee stated that:

“there shall be no discrimination against married or single female members whose rights should be the same as male’s seniority.”

By the 1950s, every Trades and Labour Council across the country had an Equal Pay Committee and the ACTU started to co-ordinate national weeks of action for equal pay. Women and men across the Australian labour movement participated in rallies, stop works, demonstrations, and other industrial activities to bring about equality in wages between the sexes, in recognition that all wages would be protected with women’s labour being regarded as equal.

One article, written by a rank and file woman worker in the meat industry and published in the Meat Employees Journal in 1958, said this:

“Now that unemployment is with us again, with menacing signs of becoming chronic, what will happen to the employment of many men if women can be found to do the same work, or even better, at three-quarters of the male rate?”

All of these actions, campaigns and industrial organising culminated in the 1969 Equal Pay Case. The AMIEU took on MATFA and the commonwealth public sector unions took on the government in an effort to abolish sex discrimination in wages and work. The case itself was not successful, and Zelda D’Aprano famously chained herself to the doors of the Arbitration Commission building and Victorian state parliament, exasperated by the impasse. But the case and the surrounding industrial campaigning paved the way forward for the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission’s (ACAC) ruling on the National Wage and Equal Pay cases in 1972:

“The battle for equality of wages between the sexes is not over. Women continue to earn, on average, 14% less than men. Although it’s not as clear and direct as it was before the 1972 ACAC ruling, it still persists. Ultimately, the issue of different wages for women and men is a function of divide and rule. Maintaining different wages for people based on sex, drives wages down for everyone.

Many women involved in the campaign in the 50s, 60s and 70s saw this. They fought against it. They won then. We can win now.
WHAT’S ON

OI Glass Dispute Weekly Community Breakfast
Every Friday from 7am to 11am
OI Glass, 20-40 Booker St, Spotswood

WIMDOI Conference (Women in Male Dominated Occupations & Industries)
12th - 14th November
Devonport, Tasmania

Palestine National Day
Friday 15th November, 5:30pm
Federation Square

Young Workers Conference 2019
10am - 4pm Saturday 23rd November
Solidarity Hall, Victorian Trades Hall

165th Eureka Rebellion Anniversary
18:00-21:30 Thursday 28th November
MUA Hall, 46 Ireland Street, West Melbourne
Book tickets through ‘Eventbrite’

Fridays for Future: Global Climate Strike
12:00-15:00 Friday 29th November
State Library of Victoria

“How Labour Built Neoliberalism”
Elizabeth Humphrys and guests
19:00-20:30 Thursday 5th December
The New International Bookshop
Book tickets through ‘Eventbrite’

Rally for Permanent Visas & Family Reunion
14:00-16:00 Saturday 7th December
State Library of Victoria

End-of-year debate:
‘The time to strike is now!’
Hosted by Overland and NUW
17:30-20:00 Friday, 6th December
ETU Ballroom, Victorian Trades Hall
Book tickets through ‘Eventbrite’

FROM THE SHOP FLOOR TO SECRETARY

Patricia Fernandez
AMIEU NSW Branch State Secretary
AMIEU Federal President

I have been a member of the meatworkers union for over 35 years, I joined on my first day at work with Inghams Chickens at Hoxton Park, when the union site secretary and president introduced themselves and gave me a card.

I started working at the chicken factory whilst attending university (I was doing a psychology degree). It was the only way I could pay the rent, food and books. The money at the factory was really good and we were 100% unionised.

I stayed at the factory for 10 years, and then I went to work for the meat workers as a training liaison officer. A year later I became an organiser and many years later the State Secretary and Federal President.

I have many great memories, but for me the best are always about mass meetings, I love them: the vibe the energy, the clapping, the booing, all of it. When you bring workers together and give them a voice, they pay back in bucket loads, whether good or bad it doesn’t matter I have always taken it all in my stride and hopefully learned from my encounters with workers, to make me a better unionist.

Workers today face the real issue that they have little to no rights, today workers are treated as fodder and have very little respect as the people who bend their backs to make the profits that are enjoyed not by them but by the bureaucracy at the top.

Workers should join unions because the collective is always greater than the individual, great change can only come about when workers get behind a cause, band together and fight together without breaking rank.

History shows us that the greatest most fundamental changes have come about because workers fought for them, nothing has even been given by bosses without a fight.

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