

# Working Women's Centre

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## NEW PATTERNS OF INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY FOR WOMEN

### DEFINITION

Industrial democracy can be broadly defined as the provision of the opportunity and the right for all members of an organization, no matter what their level, to participate in the decision-making process which affects their work lives without fear of recrimination. This is in contrast to the way most organizations work today whereby it is only people at the top who have the right to make or influence decisions. We are all involved in hierarchical organizations and we know that women, in most cases, are at the bottom of the pyramid.

If industrial democracy means a better say for - and representation from - the lower levels of the organization, this will mean a change in the lot of women workers; so there seem to be many implications for women within the broad context of industrial democracy. Industrial democracy should also mean a positive input for each union, providing that we ensure that the union's policy on industrial democracy specifically takes account of the special needs of all its women members.

There are two main areas which I think we need to examine particularly closely:

- (1) Preconditions (what is necessary beforehand); and
- (2) Form (what structures of industrial democracy we want).

For the purpose of this discussion I think it is convenient to link the notion of opportunity to the form of industrial democracy in the workplace and the notion of right to the preconditions necessary for any real industrial democracy. I shall deal with the latter first but I should like to preface my comments by what I think is an important observation for women in the workforce and, noticeably, in the public service.

### DIVERSITY OF WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

When we speak about working women we tend to think of them as some sort of homogenous group. In fact I do not see this as being the case; further, I think this idea can lead us into some pitfalls when we start devising particular programmes. Specifically, I think we can speak of at least three different broad groups of women:

- (a) that group of women aged 40 + who have been in the workforce most of their lives and who generally are in clerical and semi-skilled-type positions;
- (b) the under 35's who are professionally orientated, better educated and generally have the view that work will be a permanent part of their lives;
- (c) the under 15 to 20-year-old clerical and unskilled workers who, on present statistics, will be working most of their lives but who still think primarily in terms of getting married and being housewives rather than paid workers. (For the purpose of this discussion I have to ignore the vast number of this group who are unemployed.)

It is the first and last of these groups of women which I consider to be the most important when we link together ideas of industrial democracy, improving the lot of women workers and attempting to expand the real base of our unions.

### PRECONDITIONS

Now let us take a closer look at the idea of preconditions. First of all some general points need to be made which are applicable to all work levels and to all the groups mentioned above. Initially education for paid job representatives and for rank-and-file union members must be of prime concern in any industrial democracy programme. We must understand what we are getting into - the costs, benefits and responsibilities.

If job representatives are to do their job efficiently they need to know not only about the role of the union and the benefits it offers to its members but, if they are to represent the women in the organization, I would suggest that they also need to have some knowledge of the rights which presently exist for women in the workforce. By this I mean such things as opportunities for reclassification, rights to equal pay, superannuation and the like. They need also to be aware of policies for the future and to be sensitive to problems of the present. Job representatives need to have extensive training so that they can understand the concepts behind industrial democracy. They should be in a position to explain and answer questions from rank-and-file members on this topic. Rank-and-file members also have this need for special training if they are to participate in industrial democracy programmes.

Specifically, that group of young women consisting of clerical and unskilled workers need skills training in order for them to operate effectively. However they not only need training in how to operate in meetings, putting forward motions and assessing "manouvres"; they also need special training in order to understand what organizations are all about. This would serve a dual role. It would be important as a method of helping them realize exactly what their future position was likely to be; that is, while they may be housewives and mothers, they are also equally likely to remain working. It would also provide a "skill" of understanding which is missing amongst this group because of their lack of "identification" with work as a part of their lives. If they are to participate in industrial democracy programmes they must have some knowledge about what it means to be part of an organization. In fact these conclusions are probably applicable to both male and female members of any particular union or workplace who are at the bottom range of the organization. I would suggest that this should be incorporated within the union's policy of industrial democracy as a demand to be put to management.

It is also important that the union push for the implementation of the Corbett Report<sup>(1)</sup> recommendations within the Public Service concerning women and their educational opportunities at work, particularly with regard to the last group of women. Some examples of these recommendations are: positive action in the area of recruitment, special counselling in the area of job opportunities, special career development programmes and active classification review.

Apart from these general preconditions, there are some quite specific preconditions which need to be met if industrial democracy is to mean anything to women workers. Most importantly we must remember that the battle for equal pay has still not been successfully concluded, particularly for those women within the first category mentioned above. It is meaningless to say we can all sit around a table as equals and discuss the issues concerning our workplace if we know that some of the people around the table are not receiving the same pay for doing the same job as others around the table.

### Job Security

The whole issue of job security is most important to both the second and third categories of women workers. While it may not be "economically feasible" at this stage to speak of achieving paid maternity and paternity leave, it is my opinion that these are most important demands in the long run and should not be forgotten. There are, however, economically viable ways of ensuring that women do have job security. As the Corbett Report recommended, one of the simplest ideas is that there be automatic reinstatement for all employees after resignation for domestic reasons. If this were adopted it would also be important that these employees received

recognition for their past employment. There is no earthly reason why somebody who has been an efficient clerk for ten years and has then resigned for a period - for domestic reasons - should have lost all those skills acquired over the ten-year employment period. They should be able to step back into the same classification as when they left. I would also suggest that there should be continuity of the rights accrued over that period; e.g. long service leave. It should also be put that retraining opportunities may be necessary if the leave has been a long one but that this should be no bar to same status reinstatement.

Another way of approaching the question of job security is through part-time work. For many women part-time work offers a method not only of earning necessary family income but also of maintaining continuity in their working lives. Job-sharing can also serve the same purpose.

#### Promotion

Promotional opportunity is also an area in which I feel unions need to apply pressure. The Public Service Board should be pressed to fully implement the recommendations of the Corbett Report in this respect. This is particularly important as far as the third category of women is concerned. The Board should also foster amongst these women an awareness of their real position. I suggest this would also be to the union's advantage in that it would foster a more positive and supportive relationship from the second category of women in their role as union members.

#### Childcare

Despite these times of economic stringency childcare should not be forgotten. If women are to participate in their union's activities or in industrial democracy programmes, they cannot bear the whole burden of child care. The unions themselves can foster awareness of this issue amongst their members through their journals but they can also take some steps towards alleviating the problem so far as their own activities are concerned. Child care facilities should be an automatic part of every union meeting as this would make it more practicable for women members to attend rather than having to stay at home and "mind the kids".

#### Health

Health is another area where it would be to the benefit of unions to take more interest. Having spent some weeks sitting in a secretarial chair and ending up with what could be described as a rather disastrous back, I would suggest that to speak of the quality of our working lives is meaningless unless these fundamental problems are alleviated.

These are just some recommendations in the area of preconditions for industrial democracy. I am sure other women will have many suggestions to make along these lines.

#### FORMS

Now let us proceed to the forms of industrial democracy which may be most suitable for women workers. I think that if we are to have representative systems, then it must be on the basis of representation by classification. It is quite absurd to suggest that a sixteen or seventeen-year-old can sit in a composite body of management and workers and be able to participate fully. Her age and her sex would prevent that. However, if there were two young women, sitting as representatives of their work area, and if those two had had some of the training already suggested, then it would be more likely that some real participation would occur. This suggestion has broader implications than those only concerned with women. I think it applies to all those workers on the base grades. When it is suggested that union members become involved in industrial democracy programmes, it may even be worthwhile to consider the possibility that employee councils - rather than joint committees - could be a better starting point as these would provide an initially supportive experience before full entry into the fray.

Industrial democracy programmes have forced us all to re-examine the lot of those "at the bottom of the woodpile". We should not let the initiative stop there. I would hope that this experience will make us examine all areas of our working lives and our union's policy as it affects them. In particular, I would suggest that perhaps it is time for the women members to get together and work through our unions' various policies in order to get what we want from them.

- (1) *The Corbett Report was the result of an investigation into the South Australian Public Service. There are similar reports on other public services; e.g. The Coombs Report on the Commonwealth Public Service. There are also reports on various industries; e.g. the Jackson Report and various IAC reports.*
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This paper was written by Sue Walpole of the Industrial Democracy Unit of the South Australian Premier's Department. It was originally written for the PSA Review but, although some references are specific to the public service, most of it is relevant to all women workers.