

Immigrant Female Workers and Australian Trade Unions

Santina Bertone et Gerard Griffin

Volume 50, numéro 1, 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050994ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/050994ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Bertone, S. & Griffin, G. (1995). Immigrant Female Workers and Australian Trade Unions. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 50(1), 117–146. <https://doi.org/10.7202/050994ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article a pour but de cerner les principales dimensions de la participation des femmes à la formation en entreprise en vue d'établir une jonction entre cette dernière et l'accès à l'égalité en emploi. Les données disponibles à l'heure actuelle indiquent que les femmes sont généralement défavorisées dans la formation en entreprise. Divers facteurs explicatifs de cette situation sont examinés, notamment les critères d'attribution de la formation par les employeurs ainsi que les caractéristiques et les besoins spécifiques des travailleuses. L'analyse de ces facteurs permet de tirer des implications quant à la recherche dans ce domaine et ainsi qu'au rôle que joue la formation dans les entreprises ayant adopté un programme d'accès à l'égalité.

Immigrant Female Workers and Australian Trade Unions

SANTINA BERTONE
GERARD GRIFFIN

This paper analyzes the relationship between Australian trade unions and their non-English-speaking-background female members. In particular, it examines the level of services provided by unions to these members, the extent of participation of these unionists in their union and the industrial priorities that they hold for their union. Drawing on a questionnaire survey of unions, of union members and detailed case studies of six unions with large immigrant memberships, it is argued that very limited targeted services are provided to non-English-speaking-background female members; that non-English-speaking-background and English-speaking-background female unionists have similar levels of participation in most rank-and-file activities, but that the former group remains underrepresented among full-time officials; and that the industrial priorities of female unionists are similar irrespective of their backgrounds.

There now exists a significant literature that highlights the particular problems faced by immigrant women in the work force. This literature focuses around three main issues: the relatively disadvantaged position of immigrant women in the labour market, as measured by indicators such as income and unemployment; the double burden of paid work and unpaid

- BERTONE, S., Workplace Studies Centre, Victoria University of Technology, Victoria, Australia.

GRIFFIN, G., National Key Centre in Industrial Relations, Monash University, Victoria, Australia.

- The research for this project was funded by the Bureau of Immigration Research. Views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Bureau.

domestic responsibilities; and cultural problems. These issues, allied with the relatively higher union density rate of immigrant women workers from a non-English-speaking background (NESB),¹ pose major challenges to trade unions; for example, how to adequately service and represent these 'new' workers. This is particularly so for union movements in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States, nations that actively seek settler immigrants as opposed to the 'guestworker', temporary status conferred on foreign labour by some European countries. This paper assesses how trade unions in Australia have responded to these challenges. It focuses on the level of services provided by these unions to their NESB immigrant female members, the extent of participation by these members in their unions and the priorities which they hold for their union. To provide some contextual background to our analysis we commence with a brief overview of trade unions in Australia and their relationships with immigrant workers, and review the literature dealing specifically with NESB female unionists.

AUSTRALIAN UNIONS AND IMMIGRANT WORKERS

Throughout the twentieth century trade unions have played a major role in the Australian industrial relations system. This role was conferred on the union movement by the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act, 1904. The background to this arbitral model of industrial relations was a series of major strikes during the 1890s. Prior to this decade, and largely attributable to the booming economic conditions and a high demand for labour, trade unions had flourished since their inception in the early 1850s. A severe depression during the 1890s dramatically changed this trend. In a series of major strikes during the early years of this decade, aimed at protecting existing wages and working conditions, trade unions were virtually destroyed (Turner 1976). In response to this large societal conflict the founding fathers of the new Commonwealth of Australia, attempting to substitute 'the process of conciliation, with arbitration in the background,for the rude and barbarous process of strike and lockout' (Higgins 1922: 2), wrote into its constitution a provision which gave Parliament the right to make laws dealing with interstate industrial disputes. The government of the day gave effect to this provision in the 1904 Act, which established the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration.

1. In 1976, the year in which the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) first sought information in its workforce surveys on union membership, the union density rate among female NESB immigrant workers was 55 per cent, that among female English-speaking immigrant workers was 40 per cent while the unionisation rate for Australian-born female workers was 42 per cent (ABS 1976). In 1990 the equivalent figures were 44 per cent, 31 per cent and 33 per cent respectively (ABS 1990).

To operate effectively the court needed representatives both of organized labour and capital to appear before it. The legislators had recognized this necessity and had given the court powers to, in effect, recreate trade unionism. In brief, the court registered trade unions and gave each registrant exclusive jurisdiction over a segment of the workforce. Such unions had recourse to the court for dispute settlement, with the decisions of the court being legally binding. Further, discrimination against unionists was made illegal while, conversely, various inducements to membership were sanctioned. The legislation did impose some obligations on unions; however, the clear impact of the Act was to resuscitate trade unionism. In concert with similar, state-based legislation it certainly achieved this goal: in 1901 union density, the proportion of all employees that were union members, was 6 per cent; by 1911 density was 28 per cent, a figure which had increased to 52 per cent by 1921 (Deery and Plowman 1991:226). Between 1921 and 1980, with the exception of a few years during the depression of the 1930s, density remained above 50 per cent. During the 1980s, in line with developments in many industrialized economies, density gradually decreased to its 1992 level of 40 per cent. In addition to encouraging union membership the legislation also enshrined trade unions as the monopoly voice of labour: only in very exceptional circumstances could non-unionized employees appear before the court.

Immigrants to Australia, accordingly, found a strong, well-organized union movement awaiting them. Many immigrants had no choice but to become a union member: a significant number of *de facto* closed shops existed, particularly for manual workers in the manufacturing, transport and construction industries (Wright 1983), all significant employers of immigrant labour. One estimate claimed that, in 1980, 'approximately half of all trade union members in Australia were found to be covered by.... closed shop arrangement' (Wright 1983:250). Prior to the 1950s this situation presented few problems for either unions or immigrant workers. Based on the White Australia policy the overwhelming bulk of immigrants came from the British Isles, with many already holding union membership in their home country. In the post-World War II period, however, the focus of Australia's immigration policy, spurred by shortages of labour, concerns over defence needs and a fall in the number of British immigrants, switched initially to refugees displaced by the war and then to Southern European countries. In 1966 the White Australia policy ceased to operate although it was not abolished officially until 1973 when a policy of multiculturalism was adopted by the Commonwealth Government. Since 1973 'non-European immigrants have increased to a level of at least 40 per cent of intake from backgrounds which were previously excluded' (Freeman and Jupp 1992:5). Despite economic difficulties during the 1980s immigration levels remained high, peaking at 140,000 permanent arrivals in both 1988 and 1989.

Consequently, by 1992, 22 per cent of people living in Australia were born overseas, with a further 26 per cent having at least one parent who was born overseas.

Australian unions traditionally adopted an antagonistic approach to large-scale immigration. Quinlan (1989:203) contends that the 'overriding fear of the union movement was that unstructured immigration would depress wage levels, living standards and job prospects'. He notes, however, that 'racism also played a prominent part in hostility to non-Europeans' (Quinlan 1989:203). Consequently, trade unions were strong supporters of the White Australia policy. In the aftermath of World War II the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the peak-council for the union movement, acceded to increased levels of immigration. Lever-Tracy and Quinlan (1988:119) argue that 'subsequently, with a few trivial exceptions, Australian unions did not practice exclusion against immigrants'. They offer a number of reasons, such as the labour market implications of a large, non-unionized sector of the workforce, the desire to continue with closed shops and the scrutiny of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, to explain this lack of antipathy. Rather than exclusion immigrant workers were expected to join trade unions and to conform to existing union norms.

Martin (1978) provides an overview of the historical relationship between trade unions and their NESB members in the post-World War II period. She argues that there were four distinct phases of union response to the growth of immigrant workers. In the first phase, 1948-54, a number of unions attempted to woo immigrant workers' support for political causes; this was particularly true in those unions where communists and right-wing Roman Catholic forces were battling for control. Between 1955 and 1964, the second phase, unions and union officials regarded immigrant members as largely indistinguishable from other members. In keeping with the dominant assimilationist philosophy in Australian society at that time, unions treated the absorption of immigrants into union ranks as unproblematic. Their only interest was to get immigrants to join the union.

Problems emerged in the third phase, 1965-72, when immigrants began to assert their presence. Immigrants were prominent in a number of strike actions taken in defiance of union leaderships, from the General Motors Holden strike and Mount Isa strikes in 1964, to the Ford Broadmeadows strike in 1973. In the latter dispute, 80 per cent of the rank-and-file participating in the strike came from non-English-speaking countries, and the leaders were predominantly Greek and Italian. Around that time, unions began to recruit immigrants as shop stewards and dues collectors and later into full-time positions. In the fourth phase, 1973-78, Martin argued that union officials' treatment of NESB members was the subject of external

research and analysis, and that these external influences became sources of pressure towards change. A number of government and non-government bodies, such as the Centre for Urban Research and Action and the Ecumenical Migration Centre, were vocal in their criticism of unions and their lack of advocacy of immigrant rights. The plight of immigrant female workers was especially highlighted. Immigrant worker conferences were held in Melbourne in 1973 and 1975 at the initiative of groups of immigrant activists seeking reforms in the union movement. In a very real sense Martin was identifying the 1970s as a significant period of change in the immigrant-union interface, albeit with the emphasis on external sources of change. We now briefly review the literature covering this external research and analysis, particularly those contributions focusing on unions and their NESB immigrant female members.

LITERATURE

The issue of the relationships and interactions between Australian trade unions and their NESB members has been the subject of at least thirty studies. Most of these, however, are very limited in scope and method; many were funded by small government grants to community organizations or were based solely on the personal experience or views of community activists. Of the half-dozen major studies only one focused specifically on immigrant women. In 1976 the Centre for Urban Research and Action (CURA) published a major study on immigrant women in the Melbourne manufacturing industry, entitled *But I Wouldn't Want My Wife to Work Here...* This was the first time that any large-scale research had been conducted on immigrant workers and the first empirical study to focus on female workers.

The study brief was both broad and ambitious: it set out to investigate the physical and social conditions of thirty factories employing immigrant women; 710 female workers, 87 per cent of whom were union members, and smaller samples of employer and union representatives, were interviewed. The views of the immigrant women were sought on a range of subjects involving the physical work situation, work systems and work arrangements, reasons for working, relationship with trade unions and management, childcare and English-language requirements.

The study highlighted the generally negative relationships between unions and their NESB female members. First, these members had little contact with trade union officials; visits to the factories were infrequent, there were relatively few bilingual organisers with whom they could communicate, the unions made little use of interpreters or multilingual material and all union meetings were conducted in English, a major

communication barrier because of the limited comprehension of English on the part of most of the membership. Second, few immigrant women were shop stewards and most full-time officials were Anglo-Saxon males. Third, participation was low: 36 per cent of immigrant women members attended union meetings, 28 per cent voted at elections and 26 per cent talked to union representatives. Fourth, although interested in the concept of unionism, the general perception of unions held by these members was negative. Finally, unions were not perceived to be pursuing the issues that were important to these NESB female members.

A study of sixty-eight Spanish-speaking female workers supported a number of the contentions made in the CURA study. Just over half of these women were union members but few had 'recorded any satisfactory contact with or assistance from the unions in their particular workplaces'. Most had never seen their union representative and 'issues of concern to the women do not appear to have been addressed by any of the unions' (*Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs 1979:29*).

In her analysis of 430 vehicle industry workers, Hill (1990) found that there was a low level of union participation by female workers, most of whom were immigrants. This, she argued, reflected their low status in the workplace and the often negative perceptions of shop stewards towards both NESB and female workers. Underrepresentation of NESB female members among the ranks of full-time officials has been found in a number of studies. For example, out of a total of three hundred union officials in Victoria in the early 1970s, Hearn (1974) was able to identify only nine who were of non-English-speaking backgrounds and all of these nine officials were males.

The reasons for NESB female members' low level of participation was one of the issues analyzed in a 1979 study of unions in the state of Victoria (Horsley et al. 1979). Interviews with officials from nineteen unions revealed a range of problems unions had in involving immigrant women in union processes. Attitudes of male partners, the restricted role of women in some cultures, language problems and fear of asserting themselves were some reasons offered to explain low levels of participation by immigrant women in their unions. A similar range of reasons was offered by union officials in New South Wales in Nicolaou's (1991) study. He concluded, however, that 'there is a lack of understanding among the majority of union officials about the mixture of difficulties faced by immigrant unionists in general.... and immigrant women unionists in particular' (Nicolaou 1991:132).

Overall, the contentions of these studies can be briefly summarized in three main points. First, there is a lack of special services to meet the specific needs of female immigrant unionists. Second, these members have a low level of participation in union activities, such as voting and attending

meetings, and they are grossly under-represented in official union positions, relative to their membership numbers. Third, unions do not pursue the issues which are important to immigrant women. It is argued that all of these factors result in both a general alienation from and negative perceptions of trade unions by NESB female unionists.

These contentions, however, are open to debate on at least two counts. First, it could be argued that they apply equally to female English-speaking members. For example, the CURA (1976) study, the empirical cornerstone of many of the contentions in the literature, did not use any control group of Anglo-Saxon women workers in the workplaces it studied. Accordingly, it is possible that English-speaking female unionists working in the same factories had levels of participation similar to those of their NESB female immigrant workmates. Indeed, based on Davis's (1986) study of participation in six unions this does not seem an unlikely possibility. However, many of the authors argue that the contentions apply with much more force to female NESB members: while they concede that English-speaking female unionists are underrepresented in official union positions, or have low levels of participation in unions, they argue that NESB female unionists have even lower representation and lower levels of participation.

Second, the studies on which these contentions are based were conducted mainly during the 1970s or early 1980s. Given the significant changes that have occurred in the union movement during the 1980s, for example, declining density (Peetz 1992) and massive restructuring with the specific goal of more adequately meeting the needs of members (Griffin 1992), these conclusions may not present an accurate assessment in the 1990s. In particular, during the 1980s the union movement, as part of its response to sharply declining density rates, selected two groups of workers, young employees and female employees, as targets for attention to their specific needs. The underlying rationale for this policy was both simple and straightforward: both groups had significantly less than average union density rates so this gap could be substantially narrowed by developing appropriate policies and strategies catering to the special needs of these groups. In 1989 an official of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the union peak-council, was able to list ACTU policies and actions dealing with issues such as child care, equal pay, equal opportunity/affirmative action, sexual harassment and flexible work options (Doran 1989). She concluded that 'unions are being encouraged to take special measures to ensure women become involved in unions activities' and that 'issues relevant to women workers are clearly on the industrial agenda for unions for the foreseeable future' (Doran 1989:201). Perhaps the most conspicuous example of union accommodation of women workers was the decision of the 1993 ACTU biennial Congress that, by 1999, females should

comprise 50 per cent of the ACTU Executive. Leaving aside the question of the degree of success of these policies and actions, the issue we wish to address is the current relative position of English-speaking and NESB female members vis-à-vis their trade unions. In other words, are the degrees of difference identified in the earlier literature still prevalent? Answering this question and identifying existing levels of services, of participation and of priorities of female NESB immigrant unionists in their union are the purposes of this paper.

DATA AND METHOD

The research process utilized a number of different methods of inquiry: self-administered questionnaires, interviews, participant observation and scrutiny of records and other documents. The study was carried out in three main phases and was conducted in the State of Victoria. Victoria is Australia's second most populous state and has a disproportionate share of many industries employing large concentrations of immigrant labour such as motor vehicles, food and clothing and textiles. As will be detailed later nearly one-quarter of all Victorian unionists have non-English-speaking backgrounds, a figure significantly higher than that in other states.

Phase I consisted of a questionnaire survey of all unions in Victoria. Its main aim was to establish the existing relationship between the trade unions and their immigrant members. Much of the focus was on factual data: what proportion of members and officials had non-English speaking backgrounds; what policies did the unions have in relations to NESB members; what services were specifically geared to NESB members; what provisions for English-language training were in awards and agreements, and the membership utilization of these provisions; and what links did the unions have with ethnic community organizations. In addition, a range of attitudinal data were sought: how active were NESB members in union affairs; whether NESB members' interests were adequately catered for in award restructuring; whether the unions should do more to assist NESB members; and the participation of female NESB members in union official positions.

The survey was mailed in late October 1990 to the secretaries of 109 unions affiliated to the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC), the state peak-council, and to a further 19 organizations which were recognized associations under the Industrial Relations Act, Victoria, 1979, but were not affiliated to Trades Hall. In total, 71 survey returns were received, a response rate of 55 per cent. The combined membership of these unions, however, was 611,297 or approximately 85 per cent of the estimated 719,400 unionists in Victoria in August 1990 (ABS 1990). Further, as most

of the unions that did not respond to the survey were predominantly smaller, white-collar unions, with presumably low immigrant membership, it is likely that those unions which did respond represent more than 85 per cent of immigrant unionists in Victoria.

Phase 2 comprised detailed case studies of the Victorian branches of six unions. The branch level was chosen as the focus for research because it is the key organizational unit in Australian trade unions. For example, union members are recruited into branches and the delivery of services to the members, such as immigrant specific services, occurs at branch level. Most unions, including our case study unions, structure their branches to cover specific states. This extensive geographical coverage is, however, more apparent than real because of the concentration of the Australian population into a relatively small number of large, coastal cities. We recognize that six case study unions do not adequately represent all unions in Victoria; nevertheless, an attempt was made to achieve some balance in terms of size, industry and occupational coverage, gender of membership, private and public sector employment, and political orientation. Table 1 lists these unions and some of their characteristics. Two of the unions draw their memberships from the public sector. The Australian Postal and Telecommunications Union (APTU) organizes employees in mail distribution and mail sorting centres. The size of its predominantly male membership is linked to levels of employment within Australia Post, an organization which enjoys a virtual monopoly of mail distribution in Australia. The Hospital Services Union of Australia (HSUA) covers employees such as cleaners, orderlies and clerical workers in hospitals; registered nurses and doctors are covered by their own unions. The mainly female membership has been quite militant in recent years, engaging in a series of industrial actions in response to government attempts to curtail its health sector budget.

Of the four private sector unions, three operate in segments of the manufacturing industry, the fourth in the construction industry. The Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU) has long been one of the leading, left-wing unions in Australia. Initially covering skilled craftsmen its overwhelmingly male membership has expanded in recent years to encompass unskilled labourers, following the demise of the labourers union. Approximately 80 per cent of the membership of the Vehicle Builders Employees Federation (VBEF) are NESB employees working on the production line of the five motor vehicle manufacturers operating in Australia. A traditionally militant union, its membership has been contracting in recent years in line with declining levels of employment in the industry. Tariff reductions have been a major factor underlying this decreasing employment, a development which is also a major influence explaining the declining membership of the

Clothing and Allied Trades Union (CATU). This union draws its members mainly from the larger factories in the industry and has little or no presence in the outwork sector. A majority of its members are female NESB workers. The final union, the National Union of Workers (NUW), organises its predominantly male members from among manual workers in warehouses and distribution centres. The combined membership of these six unions is just under 112,000 or 15 per cent of all unionists in Victoria; however, based on unpublished data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the NESB members of these unions, at approximately 51,000, represent 30 per cent of the 170,000 NESB unionists in Victoria in August 1990.

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the Six Unions

<i>Title</i>	<i>Membership</i>			<i>Industry</i>	<i>Sector</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>NESB%*</i>	<i>Gender</i>		
Australian Postal and Telecommunications Union (APTU)	13 500	35	Predominantly Male	Communications	Public
Building Workers Industrial Union of Australia (BWIU)	20 000	35	Predominantly Male	Building and Construction	Private
Clothing & Allied Trade Union of Australia (CATU)	15 000	65	Predominantly Female	Manufacturing (Clothing)	Private
Hospital Services Union of Australia (No 1 Branch) (HSUA)	27 000	40	Majority Female	Health Services	Predominantly Public
National Union of Workers (NUW)	20 000	30	Majority Male	Manufacturing /Distribution	Private
Vehicle Builders Employees Federation of Australia (VBEF)	16 000	80	Predominantly Male	Manufacturing (Vehicle)	Private

* Minimum estimates of union officials

The case studies drew on both interviews and union documents. In total, sixty-one interviews were conducted with officials of the six unions; sixteen of these interviews were with shop stewards, forty-five with full-time union officials ranging from branch secretaries to industrial officers and organizers. All branch secretaries of the six unions were interviewed and usually at least one other senior official (such as Branch President or

Assistant Secretary), as well as a mixture of specialist and non-specialist staff. The number of interviews varied depending on the number of industrial staff employed, the availability of officials and the number of shop stewards contacted via the workplace surveys in Phase 3. We included in the interviews: at least one senior official, at least two organizers, at least one women official, at least one NESB official (either first or second generation), and any specialist staff who normally have regular contact with immigrant members or whose duties affect immigrant members generally (for example, workers compensation officers, rehabilitation officers, education officers and ethnic liaison officers). The duration of the interviews ranged from one to four hours, the average being 1.5 to 2 hours. Supplementing the data collected from the interviews was an extensive search of internal union documents, such as past issues of branch and federal journals, newsletters, organizers' reports, minutes of branch executive meetings, minutes of quarterly and general meetings, branch statistics and so on.

Phase 3 of the research involved the administration of a questionnaire survey to a sample of members of the six case study unions. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part A, consisting of thirteen questions, sought a range of demographic data on the respondents, such as age, gender, marital status, country of birth and years of residence in Australia. Part B, consisting of forty-two mostly Likert-type and mostly precoded multiple choice questions, sought to gauge members' level of union activity, their participation in union structures, attitudes to trade unions, industrial priorities, desired union services, satisfaction with union representation, experience of ethnic discrimination, attitudes to award restructuring and training, and their ability to speak, to understand and to read and write English. The questionnaire was translated into ten languages: Arabic, Cambodian, Chinese, Croatian, Greek, Italian, Serbian, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese. The choice of languages was based on a consensus of the ethnic liaison officers and contact officers from each union on the ten most commonly spoken languages amongst the membership of the six unions. It was decided to administer the membership questionnaire through the workplace. This decision was influenced by two factors: first, generally poor response rates to postal surveys, which, in this case, would have been exacerbated by language difficulties; and, second, the lack of union records which would have allowed us to target particular nationalities with the questionnaire in the appropriate language. Because this method is a departure from the standard random selection of survey participants, we provide a detailed outline of the selection procedure.

The initial step was to draw on union resources to choose the workplaces. Several requirements were specified:

- limit of 250-300 members to be included in each union sample;
- include members from a representative sample of workplaces across the union's membership in Victoria;
- include small and medium-sized workplaces, where possible;
- include public sector and private sector workplaces, where relevant;
- focus on workplaces with a high immigrant membership;
- include both Australia-born and overseas-born members in the sample for comparison purposes; and
- include 'good' and 'bad' workplaces, and not just those workplaces where the union was strongest or most organized.

In total, twenty-seven workplaces were covered in the survey, seventeen in the private sector and ten in the public sector. Employers in the postal, telecommunications and building industries were generally very helpful, allowing workers to complete the survey during paid work time. However, a number of other employers, in the health, vehicle manufacturing and clothing sectors, refused such time, necessitating approaches to members during meal and tea breaks. Those members who were given paid time to complete the survey usually returned it to the researcher immediately after completion. Those not given time off were provided with a free-post, preaddressed envelope and asked to mail the survey return as soon as possible.

Within large workplaces, given time and other constraints, it was not possible to survey all the relevant union members. In these cases, a random selection of the membership of the case study union was made. Where time off was provided to members to do the survey, this was done by negotiating with supervisors to release discrete work groups to a prearranged venue such as a training room. Recognizing that some work groups may contain concentrations of people of particular ethnic backgrounds, efforts were made, through discussions with shop stewards and supervisors, to ensure a mixture of ethnic representation across groups. Where time off was not provided, the researcher generally approached members during meal and tea breaks. In these cases, the sample contained all those individuals present in the lunchroom on that day, who agreed to participate in the survey.

To administer the questionnaire, one of the researchers visited the sites and spoke to members, often with the assistance of interpreters, before handing out the survey. This gave the researcher the opportunity to observe working conditions, interact with the membership and management, and encourage participation in the survey. In most areas, the researcher was accompanied by an official from the union, either the ethnic liaison officer, the relevant organizer, or both, who spoke in support of the survey and

encouraged members to participate in it. In other cases, the local shop steward spoke in favour of the survey. Several of the union spokespeople emphasized the need for honest responses to the survey, even if they were critical of the union.

The directions on the inside cover of the survey form made it clear that the survey would be treated as strictly confidential by the researchers, and that no individual information would be passed on to the members' employer or trade union. Respondents were asked not to write their names on the survey forms. A standard letter was handed out with the survey, also translated into ten languages, giving some background information about the aims and purposes of the research project, and the identity of the researchers. The confidentiality aspects were reiterated by the researchers in short oral presentations to the workers before handing out the survey. The time taken by members to fill out the survey ranged from ten minutes up to one hour, with most completing the survey in twenty to twenty-five minutes.

In total, 1730 questionnaires were distributed of which 972 (56 per cent) were returned. Given the many problems inherent in surveying union members, this rate of return is regarded as satisfactory and is certainly significantly higher than would have been achieved using a postal survey. Cross-checking the characteristics of the survey respondents with the limited membership data held by the six unions confirmed the representativeness of the respondents. Figures on the gender of members was the only common data set maintained by all six unions; these data showed that 36 per cent of the combined membership of these unions were females while 33 per cent of respondents were females. Some 40 per cent of respondents were born in Australia or another English-speaking country (11 per cent female, 29 per cent male), with 60 per cent from NESB countries (22 per cent female, 38 per cent male).

Table 2 identifies the nationality of the 912 respondents who identified their country of origin. The average age of respondents was 37 years, average length of union membership was 9 years and, for NESB respondents, the average length of period of residence in Australia was 11 years.

SERVICES

Trade unions provide a wide range of services to members. What we sought to ascertain was whether unions provided services aimed at NESB members and particularly at women NESB members. Table 3 details the number of unions providing specific services to their NESB members. The most common services offered were multilingual information, interpreters,

TABLE 2
Nationality of Questionnaire Respondents

<i>Country of Birth</i>	<i>Respondents (N=912)</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Australia	272	29.8
Cambodia	25	2.7
Germany	14	1.5
Greece	59	6.5
Italy	83	9.1
Lebanon	24	2.6
Malta	18	2.0
New Zealand	10	1.1
Philippines	22	2.4
Spain	9	1.0
Turkey	20	2.2
United Kingdom	44	4.8
Vietnam	54	5.9
Yugoslavia	41	4.5
Other	217	23.6

TABLE 3
Extent of Union Services for NESB Members

<i>Service</i>	<i>Unions Providing Service (N=71)</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Immigrant liaison or ethnic liaison officer	6	8
Immigrant workers' committee	5	7
Non-English journals and newsletters	8	11
Non-English language sections in journals and newsletters	14	20
Special training courses for NESB immigrant members	10	14
Training for NESB women members	5	7
Occupational health and safety courses targeted at NESB members	10	14
Audio visual information for NESB immigrant members	3	4
Multilingual information	28	39
Interpreters	27	38
Bilingual staff	6	8
Welfare service for NESB immigrants	5	7
Workers compensation service	11	16
English language courses	3	4
Special courses for full-time industrial staff working with NESB immigrants	1	1
Special courses for full-time administrative staff working with NESB immigrants	1	1
Other	2	3

newsletters and special courses. Of the seventy-one unions that responded to the Phase 1 survey, twenty (28 per cent) provided multilingual information occasionally or when the union believed it to be necessary, five (7 per cent) provided such information frequently and three (4 per cent) always provided multilingual information. While seven (10 per cent) of these unions translated this information into more than ten languages, most restricted their translation to less than ten, with seven unions using less than five languages. Interpreter services were used occasionally by seventeen unions (24 per cent), frequently by nine (12 per cent) and always by one union. It should be pointed out that six unions (8 per cent) specifically employed bilingual staff, thus partially obviating the necessity to use interpreter services. Non-English-language journals and newsletters were produced by eight unions (11 per cent), with a further fourteen (20 per cent) having non-English-language sections in these publications. General training courses targeted at NESB members were run by ten unions (14 per cent), while a similar number ran occupational health and safety courses for their NESB members. Clearly, the provision of information to and communication with members in non-English languages has the highest priority in targeted services.

Only a minority of unions offer specific services: the twenty-eight unions that provided multilingual information included in their ranks the providers of other services. Not unexpectedly, these unions tended to have a higher immigrant membership than unions not providing such services. This concentration of NESB unionists also means that the proportion of such unionists who could receive the targeted services is significantly greater than the proportion of unions delivering the services. For example, it will be recalled that the six case study unions had a combined NESB membership of 15 per cent of all unionists in Victoria but that their combined NESB membership was 30 per cent of such unionists in Victoria. Accordingly, the use of interpreters and the provision of multilingual information, offered by 38 per cent and 39 per cent of all unions respectively, could potentially be utilized by a significant majority of NESB unionists. However, the fact that these services are offered only on an occasional basis by many of these unions greatly restricts their potential impact. Overall, based on the questionnaire survey and interviews with officials of the case study unions this current level and range of services, although restricted, is a significant improvement over the services that existed in 1980.

Few services were geared specifically at NESB female members. Indeed, only in the area of training where five (7 per cent) unions ran courses specifically for this category of members, were such services provided. The contentions in the literature would, therefore, appear to be

valid. However, two qualifications should be noted. First as just noted, a significant increase in union services targeted at all NESB members occurred during the 1980s. This increase obviously benefited female as well as male NESB members. Second, as discussed earlier, a parallel increase in services to female unionists also took place during the 1980s (Doran 1989) and, again, NESB female members should have benefited from this development. Despite these qualifications, the fact remains that only a few unions provide one specific service to the subgroup of NESB women members.

Why? We contend that the lack of services is explained by a combination of three interrelated factors: limited union resources, the minority status of NESB females within most unions and the attitudes of senior, full-time officials. The lack of resources is attributable to the combination of a traditionally large number of unions with small memberships and low membership fees. Despite a significant growth in the number of union mergers in recent years some 188 unions remained in existence in June 1993 and of this number 107 (57 per cent) had fewer than 2000 members (ABS 1993:1). And while the average union size was approximately 16000 members, it should be pointed out that this membership is usually spread across a number of state-based branches — the level at which, as noted earlier, the services are actually provided. Weekly membership dues are low and average just 0.5 per cent of gross weekly wage, significantly less than the rates found in countries such as Germany and the United States. This low level of income has been a major factor affecting the levels of trade union finances in Australia. During much of the 1970s and 1980s many trade unions were not able to adequately finance existing levels of services to members let alone think about developing new services (Griffin and De Rozairo 1993). The major restructuring of the union movement currently underway may redress, at least to some extent, the lack of resources of the union movement. The goal of restructuring is to consolidate the union movement around twenty large unions (see Griffin 1992 for details). If this goal is achieved, the union movement will be in a much better position both to allocate more resources to and to better service the needs of their members, including NESB female members.

Currently, however, lack of resources forces union leaderships to rank areas for attention, and issues such as wage increases or award restructuring — issues which affect all of the membership — inevitably receive higher priority. Next in line would be issues that affect a significant proportion of the membership. Accordingly, only in those unions where NESB female members form a significant proportion of the membership are services likely to be targeted to this group. Table 4 details the distribution

of NESB members among the survey unions.² Clearly the distribution is skewed with a majority of unions having less than 10 per cent of their members from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Not unexpectedly, the provision of NESB-type services is concentrated among those unions that have greater than 30 per cent NESB membership. Thus, it come as no surprise that two of our case-study unions – CATU, with a majority of its membership being NESB females, and HSUA, with a large minority of its members in this classification – are among the five unions offering training courses for NESB female unionists.

TABLE 4
NESB Membership Distribution among the Survey Unions,
Victoria, 1991

<i>Percentage of Membership with NES Backgrounds</i>	<i>Unions</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
0-9	42	59
10-19	9	13
20-29	6	9
30-39	3	4
40-49	3	4
50-59	3	4
60-69	3	4
70-79	–	–
80-89	1	1
90-100	1	1

Yet the correlation between the proportion of NESB membership and NESB-type services is not as strong as might be expected, pointing both to a qualification of this relationship between the level of NESB membership and services and to our third factor, the role of union leaders. It would appear that a significant proportion of NESB female members is not, of itself, sufficient to guarantee specific services for those members but rather that the higher the proportion of such members the more likely it is that these services will be provided. The key, pivotal factor determining which services are provided are the decisions of full-time union officials. Australian union officials hold different ideological views on such services. The traditionally dominant view, developed during the 1950s, was, to use

2. Note that this table is based on estimates of union officials; only 5 unions actually collected information on members' country of birth.

Martin's (1978) term, assimilationist: NESB workers after joining trade unions, often through closed shops, were expected to conform to existing norms and standards. In effect, these new unionists had to accept the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon culture and way of doing business within trade unionism. Deviation, however slight, was not acceptable in most unions. Unions, of course, were not the only organizations following such policies and indeed, in many ways, these policies were merely reflecting the dominant assimilationist approach found in the wider society.

From the mid-to-late 1960s immigrants began to assert their presence within trade unions (see Martin 1978). Unions with large NESB memberships, such as the Australian Railways Unions and the Federated Ironworkers' Association, appointed or elected NESB officials. NESB unionists were prominent in a number of lengthy disputes, particularly in motor vehicle manufacturing. Concurrently, under the Whitlam Labor Government, a new philosophy of multiculturalism – denying the hegemony of any one single culture – was officially espoused. In 1975 the ACTU Congress adopted its first official policy on the issue of immigrant unionists. This policy, and variations to the policy at subsequent Congresses, adopted the multicultural approach. Among other things, the policy called on ACTU affiliates to provide appropriate services for their NESB members. In 1981 the ACTU organized the first Migrant Workers' Conference. If adopted and implemented within the union movement this new, non-assimilationist approach could have substantial implications for the relationship between unions and their NESB members.

Our case study research shows that not all officials have abandoned assimilationist views. Of the six unions, the formal policies of two remained unaffected by the changing philosophy of the past two decades. For example, one union had debated the issue of communicating with members in languages other than English and had decided not to produce translated material. A senior official of this union summarized the views of his English-speaking background members on this issue in the following way: 'they should learn bloody English'. He also claimed that some limited translation done in the past in a small number of languages had drawn criticism from NESB members whose language was not covered in the translation and no praise or comment from those members whose language was included. The egalitarian argument (we treat all members equally) was another frequently advanced cornerstone of the assimilationist position. In brief, without delving in any great depth into the rationales for various union officials actions and policies, we found that these officials held significantly diverging views on the appropriateness of providing targeted services to NESB members. Our evidence shows that officials with assimilationist views are unlikely to target services to their NESB female

members. Conversely, officials with a multicultural view are likely to support the provision of such services.

Overall, the provision of services is a political decision influenced by the needs of the members, the resource available and the decisions of the officials. A combination of sympathetic senior officials and a significant number of NESB female members are probably necessary preconditions to the provision of specific services for such members.

PARTICIPATION

Union members can participate in different ways and at different levels in their organizations. In this section, we focus on the level of NESB female members' participation in full-time positions and, more generally, in the activities of their unions. Data on the representation of NESB female workers among unionists provide the necessary comparitors to these levels of participation. In August 1990, NESB female unionists accounted for 8 per cent of all unionists and 21 per cent of female unionists (see Table 5). Only 3 per cent of all officials and 9 per cent of female officials, however, were NESB females. Accordingly, in comparison to their proportion of the membership, NESB female unionists are underrepresented in full-time union positions, both in total and in the ranks of female officials. These figures can, however, be contrasted with the data in Hearn's (1974) study: it will be recalled that, of the nine NESB full-time officials in the early 1970s, a figure representing 3 per cent of all full-time officials, none were women. Clearly, a significant improvement occurred, but with plenty of scope remaining for further improvement. Unions with NESB female members were generally aware of this scope for improvement. The union survey sought responses to the following statement: "in comparison to their proportion of the membership NESB immigrant women are adequately represented in higher leadership positions of your union". On a five-point scale, thirty-nine (62 per cent) of the sixty-three respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, ten (16 per cent) either agreed or strongly agreed, while fourteen (23 per cent) were unsure. Crosstabulation of these responses by type of union showed that, in general, those unions that agreed with the statement had low or minimal levels of immigrant membership, while those that disagreed had higher levels of such members.

On a straight numbers basis, gender-based differences between the participation rates of male and female NESB members in full-time positions are not significant: of the 457 male officials, forty-eight had been born in NES countries. This figure is 7.1 per cent of all officials and 10 per cent of male officials. Given the higher proportion of NESB male members in

Victorian unions, noted in Table 5, the relative representation rates of both groups are quite close. This apparent equality changes substantially, however, when the actual positions held by each gender are analyzed.

TABLE 5
Representation of NESB Workers in Full-Time Union Positions,
Victoria

Classification	Union Members		Union Officials	
	No	%	No.	%
NESB Women	57,704	8.0	20	3.0
ESB Women	210,902	29.3	197	29.2
Total Women	268,606	37.3	217	32.2
NESB Men	112,376	15.6	48	7.1
ESB Men	338,389	47.1	409	60.7
Total Men	450,765	62.7	457	67.8
Persons	719,371	100.0	674	100.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Trade Union Members, Australia, August 1990*, unpublished data; Survey of Victorian unions.

Within union ranks the key, powerful positions are those of secretary, assistant secretary, and, if full-time, president. NESB women are grossly underrepresented in these positions: no president, no secretary and only one assistant secretary was an NESB female; in comparison, fifteen ESB women held one of these positions as did eight NESB men. NESB female officials were concentrated in the 'middle-management' ranks of unions: seven organizers, three research officers, one industrial officer and eight specialist officers dealing with functions such as health and safety, education, training, workers' compensation and workplace change. In essence, NESB female officials were well represented in the lower levels of union officialdom, such as specialist officers, but grossly underrepresented at senior levels. It should also be stressed that a number of these specialist positions are often not funded by unions themselves but rather by short-term government grants. Accordingly, their tenure is insecure and consequently these officials tend to be less influential, or sometimes marginalized, within the union hierarchy. Adding to this marginalization is the fact that the occupants of virtually all of these positions are appointed rather than elected officials and thus lack their own power base within the membership. More positively, and in contrast to Hearn's (1974) findings, NESB female officials are being appointed to full-time positions by senior elected officials.

We explored in our interviews the reasons why NESB female officials were concentrated in largely non-influential positions. The dual career path followed by union officials appears to offer the best explanation. The first path, traditionally dominant among blue-collar unions, is from the shop floor to shop steward to branch executive to full-time official, such as organizer, with election to the position of secretary being the pinnacle. This path normally takes a number of years to complete, with a *de facto* apprenticeship being served at each level. Consequently, most union secretaries are forty years of age or older and have had lengthy periods of union membership. Immigrant women, whose work life may also have been interrupted by periods out of the work force, are placed at a disadvantage in this scenario. Cultural factors, such as the need to attend evening meetings away from the workplace, are other possible inhibitors to progress along this path.

The second path is the appointment route. Positions such as research officers, education officers, welfare officers and other specialist positions are usually filled by direct appointment with the appointees being chosen by the elected officials. Frequently, such appointees are relatively young and possibly being groomed for more senior positions. Increasingly, the traditional divide between elected and appointed officials is disappearing, particularly in white-collar unions, with appointed officials subsequently moving to elected positions such as assistant secretary and secretary. Nevertheless, Cupper's analysis of the age structure of white-collar union officials shows that both career paths continue to exist. While the average age was 30, the younger staff were primarily researchers and industrial staff, while a majority of the group aged 45 or more held secretary or assistant secretary positions (Cupper 1983:187). Thus, the more powerful positions remain dominated by officials following the traditional career path, with the second strand path remaining secondary.

In effect, the number of NESB female officials is dependent on appointments made by elected officials, presumably with either a multicultural philosophy or a pragmatic bent towards servicing the NESB membership. Few such appointees have, to date, been able to cross the divide between appointed and elected positions. Arguably, following the accumulation of additional years of service such crossings should increase in number. During the period in which our research took place, one appointed NESB female organizer in CATU was elected to the position of assistant federal secretary, the number two position in the union.

We sought to establish the participation levels of rank-and-file NESB female members in the general activities of their unions. Previous studies have utilized a wide range of measures to gauge the level of such participation. These measures range from a single-item scale such as

attendance at meetings (Harrison 1979) to a fourteen-item scale covering attendance and activity at meetings, voting in union elections, seeking office, using grievance procedures and conversing with friends about union issues (Huszczko 1983). Most studies on determinants of participation (see, for example, Griffin and Benson 1987, Nicholson et al. 1981), including the Huszczko study, cover a number of core measures. In this study we focus on the following core issues: attending meetings, voting in elections, reading union publications, holding union office, knowledge of and interaction with the shop steward, the union lay delegate, and participating in union industrial action.

Tables 6-9 detail the participation levels of NESB female unionists and contrast these levels with those of ESB female members. Two points need to be made about this comparison. First, we chose this group to be the appropriate benchmark rather than NESB male unionists. While it is possible to control for differences such as income levels between NESB female and male union members, we argue that the concentration of the genders in the different case-study unions allied with the influence of union-specific leadership and culture on levels of participation make a gender-based comparison inappropriate. Second, the ESB female group includes female unionists born not only in Australia but also in countries where English is the dominant language such as Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. This grouping together of Australian-born with immigrant unionists from English-speaking countries is based both on classifications found in the Australian literature on immigrant unionists and on union practice. To check for similarities within the grouping we compared mean differences (ANOVA) on the scores on all participation variables identified in Tables 6-9 for the three main groups of English-speaking members: respondents born in Australia, Britain and New Zealand. On seven of the eight variables no statistically significant differences were observed. On the remaining variable, reading union publications, respondents born in Britain had a statistically significant higher score than those born in Australia. Based on this analysis we felt it appropriate to follow existing practice and aggregate all respondents born in English-Speaking countries into one grouping.

The attendance rate at workplace union meetings by both ESB and NESB female members was quite high, with the former having a higher rate (Table 6). The difference was not, however, statistically significant (χ^2 test, $p < 0.05$). Attendance drops dramatically when the location of meetings is shifted from the workplace. Again, ESB female participation was higher than that of NESB women. This time, the difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 12.272$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.0006$). This finding supports the contention of a number of union officials we interviewed that NESB female

members face additional barriers in attending non-workplace meetings. Further evidence of this barrier is that while comparable attendance figures for male unionists show a drop of similar magnitude in attendance at non-workplace meetings, no statistically significant differences exist between ESB and NESB male attendance rates. And, in fact, NESB male members have a slightly higher attendance rate at such meetings than do ESB men.

TABLE 6
Levels of Participation in Union Meetings (%)

<i>Frequency of Participation</i>	<i>Meetings held in the workplace</i>		<i>Meetings held away from the workplace</i>	
	<i>NESB Women (N=200)</i>	<i>ESB Women (N=92)</i>	<i>NESB Women (N=199)</i>	<i>ESB Women (N=96)</i>
Always	44	55	3	5
Frequently	8	9	3	1
Occasionally	34	20	11	25
Never	15	16	84	69

TABLE 7
Voting Patterns in Union Elections (%)

<i>Frequency of Voting</i>	<i>Local Elections</i>		<i>Branch/Federal Elections</i>	
	<i>NESB Women (N=199)</i>	<i>ESB Women (N=97)</i>	<i>NESB Women (N=197)</i>	<i>ESB Women (N=96)</i>
Always	23	22	13	10
Frequently	3	4	3	3
Occasionally	31	35	66	69
Never	43	39	66	69

TABLE 8
The Extent of Female Members' Reading of Union Publications (%)

<i>Frequency of reading</i>	<i>NESB women (N=203)</i>	<i>ESB women (N=98)</i>
Always	25	28
Frequently	11	13
Occasionally	42	44
Never	17	9
Don't receive them	4	6

TABLE 9
**Levels of Participation in Industria Action, Interactions
 with Shop Stewards and Holding Union Office (%)**

<i>Form of Participation</i>	<i>NESB Women^A</i>		<i>ESB Women^B</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Know identity of Shop Steward	92	8	82	18
Had Interacted with Steward on Union Business	37	63	35	65
Ever held official union position	6	94	17	83*
Participated in strike action	54	46	48	52

A N varied between 195 and 200

B N varied between 94 and 97

* statistically significant (chi-square, $p < .05$)

In contrast, the voting patterns of the two groups of female members (Table 7) virtually replicated each other in both sets of elections. Equally, while ESB females had higher readership levels than NESB members (Table 8) the difference, again using a chi-square test ($p < 0.05$), was not statistically significant. What was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 16.257$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.001$) was the differences in the reasons offered by those members who did not read union publications: of NESB female respondents, 21 per cent indicated that they were simply not interested in such reading, 24 per cent that they were too hard to read, 46 per cent that there were not enough publications in their own language and 9 per cent some other reason; the equivalent figures for ESB female members were 64, 14, 0 and 21 per cent respectively.

Table 9 shows that a higher percentage of NESB female members than ESB female members know the identity of their shop steward, had interacted with the steward on union business and had participated in strike action. These differences were not, however, statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Finally, we asked those female unionists whether they had ever held an official position in the union, such as that of shop steward or health and safety representative, or sat on the branch committee of management. Some 6 per cent of NESB respondents had held such positions, while the equivalent ESB figure was 17 per cent; this difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 8.547$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.003$).

This analysis of membership responses indicates similar levels of participation in rank-and-file activities among both ESB and NESB female members, with the two exceptions being attending meetings away from the workplace and reasons for not reading union publications. In addition, ESB female members have a higher level of participation in the ranks of lower-level union officials. Overall, we conclude that, in relation to their

proportion of the membership, NESB female unionists are significantly underrepresented both at the honorary and full-time official level, and particularly at senior official level, but have similar levels of participation to ESB female unionists in the day-to-day, rank-and-file activities of their union.³

PRIORITY ISSUES

In much of the literature dealing with the relationship between women and trade unions, there is quite often an assumption, usually implicit, that female members demand of their union priorities different from those of male members. Theoretical positions rather than empirical data usually underlie such assumptions. In an empirical study, Benson and Griffin (1988) argue that the position is more complex. Based on data collected from male and female members of white-collar public sector union, they contend that 'while male and female respondents do put statistically significant different weights on their choice of priorities, their relative ranking of these priorities is very similar' (p. 211). In other words, segments of a union's membership may wish the union to pursue some issues of specific interest to this segment but not at the expense of 'core' issues. We sought to test this proposition by comparing the union priorities of ESB and NESB female members. Questionnaire respondents were presented with a list of seventeen issues covering a wide spectrum of possible union activities, including two immigrant-specific issues, and were asked to indicate which, in their opinion, were the important issues that their union should be pursuing. Respondents were allowed to indicate as many or as few issues as they wished. Table 10 lists these issues and the number of nominations received by each issue.

There is a clear overlap in the industrial priorities of ESB and NESB female unionists. Both groups nominated the same top priority, job security, and of the top five issues nominated by both groups, four are common. Equally clearly, both groups want their unions to focus on traditional core issues – jobs, wages and conditions. Immigrant issues were ranked higher by NESB respondents: English-language classes at work was ranked sixth

3. Because our data are not longitudinal in nature it is not possible to test comprehensively the possibility that the length of residence in Australia of NESB respondents may influence levels of participation, in particular, the possibility of a convergence of participation levels over time. We were, however, able to compare the mean scores on the measures of participation identified in Tables 6-8 of NESB and ESB respondents for different lengths of union membership ranging from less than 1 year to more than 20 years. Based on a two-tailed *t* test relatively few statistically significant differences were found between these mean scores indicating that convergence over time had not occurred.

while greater immigrant representation in their union was ranked twelfth; the ranking by ESB female unionists of these two issues was thirteenth and seventeenth respectively. Overall, we conclude that the top industrial priorities for their unions of both ESB and NESB female unionists are very similar. Subordinate to these traditionally core union concerns NESB respondents ranked immigrant-type issues much higher than their ESB counterparts.

TABLE 10
Female Members' Priority Issues for Their Union

	<i>Number of Nominations</i>		<i>Ranking</i>	
	<i>NESB (N=196)</i>	<i>ESB (N=92)</i>	<i>NESB</i>	<i>ESB</i>
Job security	139	80	1	1
Better working conditions	120	60	2	3
Higher wages	112	54	3	4
Healthy and safe workplace	102	65	4	2
Better retirement benefits	80	40	5	9
English classes at work	74	17	6	13
Rehabilitation for injured workers	65	43	7	8
More jobs	60	44	8	7
Better jobs/career paths	59	48	9	6
Improved extra benefits from employer	57	28	10	11
Worker participation in work decisions	51	36	11	10
Greater representation of immigrants in the union	50	10	12	17
Equality for female workers	48	50	13	5
Shorter working hours	34	16	14	14
Childcare	32	25	15	12
Social services	30	11	16	16
More say in the running of the economy	18	14	17	15
Other	8	4	18	18

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the relationships between trade unions and their NESB female members. This relationship has been characterized by a number of assertions, usually negative in nature, that have not been subjected to empirical scrutiny. Our research shows that some of these assertions do hold true: only five unions offered one form of service, a training course, targeted specifically at NESB female members; the proportion of full-time female officials with NES backgrounds is significantly less

than the proportion of the female membership with such backgrounds; and virtually all such officials are excluded from the key, decision-making positions. However, the analysis found similar levels of participation in rank-and-file activities among both ESB and NESB female members and considerable similarity between the two groups' top priorities for their unions. If, in the 1970s, NESB female members were more alienated from their unions than were ESB female unionists, this would appear to be no longer the case in the 1990s. To confirm this conclusion, we draw on data from the phase 3 survey which contained a number of questions aimed at establishing respondents' attitudes towards both their own unions and unionism in general. Respondents were asked to indicate, on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, their attitudes towards six statements on various aspects of trade union activities and operations. The mean score of NESB female members, on a scale ranging from 6 to 30, with 6 being the most favourable score, was 16.6; that for ESB female members was 16.1. This difference was not statistically significant (t test, $p < 0.05$). Immigrant women's attitudes towards trade unionism in general had a mean score of 18.0, compared with the 17.9 score of ESB female unionists. The difference between these means was, again, not statistically significant. Accordingly, we conclude that NESB and ESB female unionists hold similar views towards both their own union and towards unionism in general. Overall, in comparison to the 1970s, significant improvements have occurred in the union-NESB women unionist relationship. Scope remains for further improvement, particularly in the participation of NESB women in senior, full-time union positions.

■ REFERENCES

- AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS (ABS). 1976. *Trade Union Members, Australia*. Catalogue No. 6325.0. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS (ABS). 1990. *Trade Union Members, Australia*. Catalogue No. 6325.0. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS (ABS). 1993. *Trade Union Members, Australia*, 30 June 1993. Catalogue No. 6323.0. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- BENSON, J., and G. GRIFFIN. 1988. "Gender Differences in Union Attitudes, Participation and Priorities." *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 203-214.
- CUPPER, L.G. 1983. "A Profile of White-Collar Union Officials." *Australian Unions*. B. Ford and D. Plowman, eds. Melbourne: Macmillan, 178-200.

- CURA. 1976. *But I Wouldn't Want My Wife to Work Here....* Fitzroy, Melbourne: Centre for Urban Research and Action.
- DAVIS, E. 1986. *Democracy in Australian Unions*. Sidney: Allen and Unwin.
- DEERY, S., and D. PLOWMAN. 1991. *Australian Industrial Relation*. 3rd edition. Sydney: McGraw-Hill.
- DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC AFFAIRS. 1979. *Giving Our Lives to this Country*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- DORAN, J. 1989. "Unions and Women." *Australian Unions*, 2nd edition. B. Ford and D. Plowman, eds. Melbourne: Macmillan, 190-202.
- FREEMAN, G., and J. JUPP. 1992. "Comparing Immigration Policy in Australia and the United States." *Nations of Immigrants: Australia, the United States and International Migration*. G. Freeman and J. Jupp, eds. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1-20.
- GRIFFIN, G. 1992. "Changing Trade Union Structure." *Contemporary Australian Industrial Relations*. B. Dabscheck, G. Griffin and J. Teicher, eds. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 211-224.
- GRIFFIN, G. and J. BENSON. 1987. "Factors Related to Membership Participation in Public Sector Trade Union Activities." *Australian Journal of Management*. Vol. 12, No. 3, 263-275.
- GRIFFIN, G. and S. de ROZAIRO. 1993. "Trade Union Finances in the 1970s and 1980s." *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 424-435.
- HARRISON, M. 1979. "Participation of Women in Trade Union Activities." *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 41-55.
- HEARN, J.M. 1974. *Migrant Experiences in Trade Unions*. PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne.
- HIGGINS, H. 1922. *A New Province for Law and Order*. London: Constable.
- HILL, E. 1990. *Migrant Workers and Award Restructuring*. Adelaide: United Trades and Labour Council.
- HORSLEY, P. et al. 1979. *Women and Unions: A Pilot Survey*. Melbourne: Community Research Action Centre, Monash University.
- HUSZCZO, G. 1983. "Attitudinal and Behavioral Variables Related to Participation in Union Activities." *Journal of Labor Research*. Vol. 4, Summer, 289-297.
- LEVER-TRACY, C., and M. QUINLAN. 1988. *A Divided Working Class*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- MARTIN, J. 1978. *The Migrant Presence: Australian Responses 1947-1977*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- NICHOLSON, N., G. URSELL and J. LUBBOCK. 1981. "Membership Participation in a White-Collar Union." *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 20, 162-178.
- NICOLAOU, L. 1991. *Australian Unions and Immigrant Workers*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- PEETZ, D. 1992. "Declining Union Density." *Contemporary Australian Industrial Relations*. B. Dabscheck, G. Griffin and J. Teicher, eds. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 171-197.
- QUINLAN, M. 1989. "Unions and Immigrants: The Post Second World War Experience." *Australian Unions*. 2nd edition. B. Ford and D. Plowman, eds. Melbourne: Macmillan, 203-224.

TURNER, I. 1976. *In Unions is Strength: A History of Trade Unions in Australia 1788-1974*. Melbourne: Nelson.

WRIGHT, M. 1983. "Union Preferences and the Closed Shop." *Australian Unions*. B. Ford and D. Plowman, eds. Melbourne: Macmillan, 241-257.

RÉSUMÉ

Les travailleuses immigrantes et les syndicats australiens

Au cours du vingtième siècle, les syndicats ont joué un rôle majeur dans le système australien des relations industrielles. Ce rôle a été confié au mouvement syndical par la *Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act* de 1904. Cette loi, la base du système d'arbitrage australien, encourageait fortement l'adhésion syndicale et consacrait effectivement les syndicats comme unique voix des travailleurs. Les immigrants en Australie y trouvent alors un mouvement syndical fort et bien organisé pouvant les accueillir. Plusieurs immigrants n'ont eu d'autre choix que de devenir syndiqués. Un bon nombre d'ateliers fermés *de facto* existaient, plus particulièrement pour les travailleurs manuels dans les secteurs manufacturier, du transport et de la construction, tous employeurs importants de main-d'œuvre immigrante en provenance de milieux non anglophones (IMNA). En conséquence, les taux de densité syndicale pour les IMNA ont toujours été plus élevés que ceux des australiens d'origine et des immigrants anglophones. Cet article s'intéresse à la façon dont les syndicats ont relevé les défis posés par un groupe d'immigrants membres, les femmes IMNA. Nous examinons le niveau de service offerts à celles-ci par les syndicats, l'étendue de la participation de ces syndicalistes dans leurs syndicats et les priorités qu'elles représentent pour ceux-ci.

La documentation existante sur ce sujet souligne le manque de services spéciaux pour satisfaire aux besoins des IMNA syndiqués féminins. On y indique également que ces membres ont un bas niveau de participation dans les activités syndicales telles les votes et la présence aux assemblées, qu'elles sont grandement sous-représentées dans les postes d'officiers et que les syndicats ne s'attardent pas aux préoccupations importantes pour les immigrantes. On conclut en outre que ces facteurs amènent les IMNA femmes syndiquées à être aliénées envers les syndicats et à percevoir ceux-ci de façon négative. Ces prétentions sont cependant sujettes à débat sur au moins deux volets. D'abord, ces études ont été menées durant les années 1970 ou au début des années 1980 et leurs conclusions peuvent ne pas tenir pour les années 1990. Ensuite, ces prétentions pourraient aussi bien s'appliquer aux membres féminins de

langue anglaise. Notre recherche vise alors à vérifier si les conclusions tirées dans le passé valent encore et à déterminer s'il y a des différences entre les membres féminins anglophones et les IMNA vis-à-vis leurs syndicats.

Cette étude s'appuie sur des données provenant de trois sources : une enquête par questionnaire auprès de tous les syndicats de l'État de Victoria avec un taux de réponse de 55 % (N=128), des études de cas de six syndicats en procédant à des entrevues et à des analyses des dossiers, ainsi qu'une enquête par questionnaire auprès d'un échantillon des membres de ces syndicats. Ce dernier questionnaire a été traduit dans dix langues et a connu un taux de réponse de 56 % (N=1730).

Notre étude démontre que même si une variété de services aux IMNA ont connu une expansion dans les années 1980 et au début des années 1990, un seul service, un cours de formation, visait spécifiquement les IMNA féminins syndiqués et tel service n'était offert que par cinq syndicats. Nous expliquons ce manque de service par trois facteurs interreliés : les ressources syndicales limitées, le statut minoritaire des IMNA féminins dans la plupart des syndicats et les attitudes des dirigeants syndicaux à plein temps.

Comparé à leur proportion du nombre total de membres, les IMNA féminins, en dépit d'améliorations durant les années 1980, demeurent sous-représentées de façon significative parmi les dirigeants syndicaux à plein temps, plus particulièrement au niveau supérieur. Cependant, nous avons observé des taux de participation similaires des IMNA et des membres féminins anglophones dans la plupart des activités syndicales visant les membres.

Finalement, les priorités industrielles majeures de ces deux groupes de membres sont similaires. Les deux groupes veulent voir leurs syndicats se concentrer sur les préoccupations traditionnelles, telles la sécurité d'emploi et les conditions de travail. Cependant, les IMNA syndiqués féminins accordent beaucoup plus d'importance aux sujets reliés aux immigrants que leurs collègues anglophones.