LABOUR PAINS:
WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN EMPLOYMENT,
UNIONS, AND THE LABOR PARTY IN VICTORIA,
1888 - 1914.

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Thank you also to Raelene Frances for sharing with me some additional sources on Labor women when I first began this project, and to Charles Fahey for providing me with his photographs of T.B. Guest and the biscuit factory.
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<tr>
<td>FCU</td>
<td>Federated Clerk's Union</td>
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<td>FHCU</td>
<td>Female Hotel, Club and Restaurant Employees’ Union</td>
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<td>PLC</td>
<td>Political Labor Council of Victoria</td>
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<td>THC</td>
<td>Victorian Trades Hall Council</td>
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<td>WBU</td>
<td>Women Bookbinders’ Union</td>
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<td>WCOC</td>
<td>Women’s Central Organising Committee</td>
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<td>WOC</td>
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<td>WPA</td>
<td>Women’s Political Association</td>
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<td>WPSC</td>
<td>Women’s Political and Social Crusade</td>
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<td>WPSIC</td>
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INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the experiences of working-class women spanning the years from 1888 to 1914 - a period of significant economic growth and socio-political change in Victoria. The drift of population into the urban centres after the goldrush marked the beginning of a rapid and continual urban expansion in Melbourne as the city’s industrial and commercial sectors grew and diversified. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the increasing population provided a larger workforce which also represented a growing consumer market. The rise of the Victorian manufacturing industries in this period also saw the introduction of the modern factory system. With the increasing demand for unskilled labour in factories, it was not only men who entered this new factory workforce. Young women and older children were, for the first time, drawn in appreciable numbers into the industrial workforce as employers keenly sought their services as unskilled and cheap workers. Women were concentrated in specific areas of the labour market, such as the clothing, boot, food and drink industries, which became strictly areas of ‘women’s work’. In the early twentieth century, the rigid sexual demarcation of work was represented by gender-differentiated wages and employment provisions within industrial awards.

The changes occurring in the workforce from the late nineteenth century onwards marked the start of a significant period of transformation in the Victorian economy towards modern industrial capitalist production in the twentieth century. The rapid pace of economic change was also reflected in the transformation of Victoria’s social and political institutions. The widespread poverty and distress during the depression years of the 1890s especially highlighted the urgent need for society to adopt strategies which would foster a higher standard of living and a more democratic society.

Traditional notions of woman’s innate sense of morality and humanity together with her responsibilities in marriage and motherhood identified woman’s role in the harsh world of paid employment, particularly factory work, as a major target of reform. Throughout this period state and eventually federal governments, social reform societies and the labour movement carried on a most significant debate over the need for reforms in order to encourage the development of a healthy and prosperous nation. The nascent labour movement drew much support for the concept of the ‘living wage’ to enable male breadwinners to support a growing family. From the turn of the century they mounted a vigorous campaign to organise the most vulnerable and exploited of workers, the unskilled, into a strong union movement.

Alongside the revitalisation of unionism in Victoria in the first two decades of the twentieth century came the labour movement’s entry into party politics with the formation of the Labor Party. In both the political and industrial wings of the Party, policies emerged which reflected prevailing social and sexual mores, and hence favoured the rights of male workers over those of women. In the following chapters, the experiences of female workers during years of significant change in Victorian society is examined. From the in-depth study of a group of young women at work in a Melbourne factory to the time when the small voice among women members of the Labor Party first emerged and grew stronger, this thesis traces the experiences and responses of women, both as workers and union and political activists. Although they operated within a context of considerable opposition to the advancement of women’s rights, it will be shown that women were not mere spectators in this formative period in Victorian labor history, but actively responded to the problems they faced with progressive policies for improvement of women’s economic, political and social status.

This thesis makes a new contribution to Victorian historiography because it studies in detail the experiences of working-class women in the workplace in Melbourne in the late nineteenth century, and women’s involvement in both the unions and political wings of the Victorian Labor Party between 1900 and 1914. It therefore engages three strands of Australian historiography: women’s history, political history and labor history. My methodology was, at the outset, informed by the insights of feminist historians concerning the fundamental influence of sexual division in society. The specific foci are the
extent to which sexual division has differentiated the work experiences of men and women and how this has, in turn, influenced women's strategies for improvement.

As feminist historians have rightly pointed out, traditional histories of this period have underestimated the participation of women in the industrial and political sphere and posed their activities as marginal to the more important business of male workers, politicians and unionists. Feminist historians such as Jill Matthews, Ann Curthoys, Kay Daniels and Marian Simms have all urged that there is a vital need for a revision of traditional historical methodology which will incorporate an understanding of the nature of sexual division, and of how and why it has underpinned our social, political and economic structures.²

During the 1970s the emergence of a strong body of literature concerning women's lives from the convict era to the present, written by women's historians, provided a survey of the changing fortunes of both middle-class and working-class women in rural and urban Australian society. My work is concerned with the experiences of working-class urban women and thus the insights of two major histories of women's labour, now seen as classic works, by Edna Ryan and Ann Conlon in The Gentle Invaders, and by Beverley Kingston in My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann, offered a pathway into the study of attitudes to and women's experience of paid labour.³ Kingston has investigated, on a more personal level, the emotional and physical hardships faced by female domestic servants, factory


workers and women in the professions as they struggled to achieve economic and social recognition for their labour within the restricting cultural definition of femininity and appropriate female work.

Ryan and Conlon, and Kingston, illustrated the impact of the sexual division on women's wages and conditions and paved the way for further analysis of certain aspects of the relationship between gender and class in Australian history. Interest in the position of women in the labour market was sustained by a series of articles which explored the links between patriarchal ideology and the determination of economic reward as embodied in the concept of the 'family wage'. 4

While these studies have explored in broad terms, gender-division, work and society, this thesis examines a specific group of working-class women within a specific time-frame, in order to focus sharply on the responses of these women to their inequality, within the constraints of prevailing sexual and social ideologies. The work of the feminist historian Ann Curthoys has argued that the advancement of the male breadwinner concept represented a material gain for working-class families in which women's involvement in reproduction allowed only intermittent involvement in paid work. In this context, working class people are shown, not as the passive recipients of bourgeois ideals, but as having themselves believed it was sensible to promote men's rights, when historically, 'most men were breadwinners and most women were not'. 5 While not denying the validity of Curthoys's point, this thesis concerns the other side of the coin - the difficulties faced by those women who defied their prescribed role in domesticity, who could not rely on a male breadwinner for support, but were themselves breadwinners.

The first area of my study concerns women's responses to the labour process as represented by the behaviour of the women at the Guest Biscuit Factory. Only recently have historians shown interest in female methods of worker resistance, or indeed, that such a thing has occurred. The historical void in


5 Ann Curthoys, 'Explaining the Sexual Division of Labour Under Capitalism' in Norma Grieve and Patricia Grimshaw (eds.), Australian Women. Feminist Perspectives, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1981. See also 'Towards a Feminist Labour History, p. 95.'
relation to female workers’ powers of resistance can be filled when it is recognised, as Marian Simms has argued, that the ‘prototype of political behaviour’ has been defined as the activities of male workers and their unions against capital.6

British historian Kate Purcell has made a major contribution to this stream of thought in her study ‘Militancy and Acquiescence Amongst Women Workers’.7 Purcell has challenged the stereotype of women workers as more placid and acquiescent to their economic exploitation than men in her revision of the formal, male-oriented definition of militant behaviour. She has shown, in a study of British women workers in the late twentieth century, that workers’ resistance can be manifested in a variety of informal, short-term and gender-differentiated responses largely determined by their different experience of work within a sexually divided labour market.

Economic historian W.A. Sinclair’s study of female employment trends in late nineteenth century Melbourne has shown that in a sexually demarcated labour market women workers were historically ‘not a purely passive element in economic growth’, but that their changing trends in participation has exercised a ‘significant influence on the course of economic change’.8 Sinclair’s quantitative analysis of changes in female participation rates has provided a backdrop against which my specific findings about the work patterns of the women at the Guest factory can be compared with the general employment trend of Victorian women at work within the same period.

A new field of study, that of the history of gender, the labour process and the workplace, offers great potential for adding a qualitative insight into the quantitative analysis of the sexual division of the labour market. It is at present, however, only a small field in Australian historiography. Historian Jenny Lee has remarked that the workplace has been ‘an intensely private, almost secret place’ but has

argued, from the study of archival sources such as company records, the texture of workers' lives spent within the factory walls can be uncovered. My study of the Guest biscuit factory provides an in-depth look at the work practices of a group of young women, the relationships among them, and between the women, their supervisor and their employer. It examines in particular, the influence of gender on their wages, conditions and responses to work.

Jenny Lee and Charles Fahey have shown also that the use of company records provides a vital alternative insight into official estimates of wage levels, hours, conditions and the overall prosperity of unskilled workers in the 1870s and 1880s who have left historians few other traces of their daily experience of work. From the study of the company records of several Victorian rural and manufacturing industries they have argued that the wages of unskilled workers were often highly irregular, owing to the seasonal, temporary and casual demand for labour at that time. Their finding that for many working-class families 'the reliance on a single male breadwinner was a fragile arrangement' highlights the importance of women's paid labour to the working-class family economy. My study of the young women at the Guest biscuit factory contributes a more personal account of the familial circumstances of such women, but also locates them within the general economic position of unskilled workers as described by other labour historians.

The other area of this thesis concerns the rise of women's activism within the union movement and the Victorian Labor Party in the early twentieth century - an area which has not been previously explored in any depth. In 1956 equal pay activist and secretary of the Women's Central Organising Committee, Muriel Heagney, urged Labor women that 'it is high time that the history of women's activities was written'. Heagney appealed directly to the 'old timers' of the Women's Central Organising

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12 Muriel Heagney, 'Notes on Women in the Australian Labor Movement', Trades Hall, 1956, Muriel Heagney Papers, MS 9106, Box 1162/6(b), La Trobe Library.
Committee to send her any records about Labor women they may have had, and to share with her their personal reminiscences for the purposes of compiling such a history. The history of women in the Labor party which Heagney had planned unfortunately never eventuated and the records of women’s early role in the Labor Party remain scarce.

The new method of interpretation of the history of women’s labour informed by the influence of sexual division has, however, advanced slowly in the scholarship of women’s political activism. Female political and union activists were no less subject to the influence of gender division than other women, but recognition of the part they played in the nascent labour movement is often still obscured by masculine interpretation of the political world. In the 1970s women’s rights activists identified the union movement as a bastion of male dominance over women. Feminists successfully documented women workers’ feeling of alienation within unions dominated and led by men and presented policies for change. But their failure to recognise the historical origins of a late twentieth century situation obscured the fact that women have a tradition of union activism from the turn of the century.

There has, however, been some progress in the recovery of women’s union and political heritage in a number of articles. Raymond Brooks and Edna Ryan have both examined separate industrial disputes

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14 In Women at Work, for example, Kay Hargreaves argues that early women’s unions ‘were short-lived, and attempts to form them ceased after 1911’. (p. 15). Jocelyn Clarke and Kate White claim that in the first half of this century Australian women ‘rarely played a prominent role at any level of Party organisation’. Women in the Labor Party, they state, acted as ‘auxiliaries and helpmates’ and those few who were critical of the Labor hierarchy are described as ‘left-wingers and middle-class intellectuals’. Jocelyn Clarke and Kate White, Women in Australian Politics, Fontana, Sydney, 1983. P. 33. The lack of investigation of women’s early role in the Labor Party has also led to a tendency for the rise of women’s political activism in left-wing circles to be seen as an almost entirely post-World War One phenomenon. For example, the history of women’s agitation for equal pay has focused on Muriel Heagney’s role in the Council for Action on Equal Pay from the 1920s, despite the fact that Labor women fought a spirited battle for equal pay from 1912. For example, see Kay Hargreaves, Women at Work, Introduction and Chapter One, Penelope Johnson, ‘Gender, Class and Work: The Council of Action for Equal Pay and the Equal Pay Campaign in Australia During World War II’, Labour History, May 1986, p. 133.
involving women in 1884 (the Victorian Tailoresses’ Strike) and 1906 (the New South Wales Laundresses’ dispute). They have shown how conventional methods of dispute settlement failed women in their attempts to win recognition in a male-oriented system. There are a few other studies which also indicate the extent to which women unionists have agitated for improvements without the support of male unions. Two studies of female unions in Western Australia, for example, have further shown that the labour movement’s lack of support for female union initiatives in Victoria was a common occurrence within labour movement circles in other parts of the country. There has, however, not been any overall effort to show the continuum of women’s activism in this sphere. My study of Labor women between 1903 and 1914 is more than a useful narrative of events during these forgotten years of feminist agitation, and goes beyond merely adding the women to a story of male political achievement; it explores the way in which gender relations within the labour movement divided the policies and strategies of the men and women of the Labor Party, brought class and gender into conflict and ultimately created overwhelming problems for feminists in the movement.

The historiography of women’s involvement in the labour movement in other countries has also come from a methodology which challenges masculine interpretation of women’s experiences. These


18 Meredith Tax, The Rising of the Women. Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917,
studies have documented very similar difficulties faced by female union activists in the United States and Britain as they fought for female recognition within labour movements committed to the primacy of male workers' rights. Barbara Drake's contemporary work *Women and Unions*, for example, shows that the Victorian example described in this thesis is comparable to the British experience in the same period. 19 In Britain, women worked for low wages within a small range of industries similar to those in Victoria and were also confronted with male Labor hierarchy's apathy and hostility when they agitated for equal pay. Anne Phillips' recent contribution *Divided Loyalties* has specifically demonstrated how the unity of the early British Labor feminists was persistently threatened by exigencies of working-class solidarity and political pragmatism - a recurring problem also for women in the Victorian Labor Party. 20

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Given the limited historiography of my particular area of concern, it was fortunate that the primary sources, whilst often patchy, so clearly indicated a broad outline of the issues and events which demanded attention. The collection of company records of the Guest biscuit factory, held at the University of Melbourne Archives, offered an excellent entry into the study of the workplace as experienced by women in the late nineteenth century. 21 T.B. Guest reflected the interests of a large factory owner and employer; the age, sex and skill ratio of his employees and the organisation of the factory were common in other factories of that kind.

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The company’s Engagement Books, which date from 1888 onwards, contain information about the workers’ family background and employment history. They were richly annotated by T.B. Guest himself and the personal comments he scribbled daily in these books starkly illustrated the sexual division of the work process, of his treatment of his employees, and of their responses to his demands. The Wages Books correspond to the Engagement Books and so the two studied together enabled the overall trend in wage levels, staff turnover and re-engagement rates to be discerned. These personnel records, supplemented with some sketches of the factory and the ephemera from the collection, added to my ability to reconstruct, as far as possible, the experiences of the women at work there in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

The period between 1900 and 1912 is the period in which sources on the study of Labor women proved to be most scarce. The early socialist newspaper *Tocsin* contains irregular coverage of women’s political groups between 1898 and 1903 but was generally sympathetic to feminist goals. Between 1903, when the Women’s Organising Committee was established, and the Labor Women’s Convention in 1909, there are no first-hand W.O.C. records, nor are its activities reported in the Labor party newspaper *Labor Call*. Sam Merrifield and Muriel Heagney both noted down their personal recollection of the early days of the W.O.C., and these consist of brief chronological narratives of events and changes in personnel.22

Between 1909 and 1914 the WOC was at its height of activism and this is reflected in a greater number of records. *Labor Call* did not yet contain a ‘women’s column’, but in these years WOC members were regular correspondents. The Sam Merrifield Collection at the La Trobe Library, Victoria, offers WOC material, although most of the records relate to the period after 1912.23 The Political Labor

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22 Muriel Heagney Papers, MS 9106, boxes 1162/6(a), 1162/6(b) in particular. Heagney was a central figure in the campaign for the reinstatement of the WOC in 1914 and the drafts of the motion she presented to the April 1914 conference contained in 1162/6(b) give the clearest description of the events at the Conference. See also Sam Merrifield Collection, Australian Labor Party, Victorian Branch, W.C.O.C., Papers, 1903-1964, Item 5. Item 9 contains a small publication of the WCOC, the *Souvenir. March 1918-March 1938, A Record of Service* which gives a brief run-down of the genesis of the W.C.O.C.

23 Minutes of the Women’s Political, Social and Industrial Council, 1916-1917. Merrifield Collection, Item 2. The W.P.S.I.C. correspondence is actually contained in Item 1 as W.C.O.C. correspondence, which it is not since the W.P.S.I.C. was, in fact, quite distinct
Council and Trades Hall Executive Committee minute books note deputations and correspondence received from Labor women, but while giving a brief version of events as seen by the Executive members, they can still be of use to fill in the gaps in other sources.24

The wide controversy over equal pay in 1913 in Victoria provided Labor women with some brief prominence outside the Labor press. The Argus and the Age both followed the issue closely, thus supplementing the Labor Party perspective offered in Labor Call. The richest single source for the entire period are the minutes of the Labor Women’s Convention in 1913.25 Its recent discovery at Trades Hall in late 1986 recovered over 50 pages of early Labor party debate on equal pay. While this document explained much about the issue, the complexity of the debate raised many new questions as well.

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In this thesis I argue that working class women in the paid labour force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century faced serious and increasing difficulties, in some ways similar to men of their class, in other ways different because of the cultural definition of femininity and appropriate female work. These problems elicited a variety of responses from working-class women themselves. One response of women was to adopt individual short-term strategies in reaction to unsatisfactory situations within a given workplace, and within the limited employment options offered by a sexually segmented labour market. Female leaders did, however, emerge to articulate and promote structural strategies of change within both the industrial and political wings of the emerging male-dominated labour movement. Their contribution to labour discussion was innovative and often radical, but the twin constraints of economic and gender-based opposition eventually thwarted their efforts to change the direction of Labor policy.

from the W.C.O.C. Most of the W.C.O.C. correspondence begins in 1918, but then jumps from 1918 to 1924.

24 Central Executive of the Political Labor Council, Minute Book, June 1911-January 1914; Melbourne Trades Hall Council, Executive Committee, Minute Book, Vol. 4, 1910-1912.

25 Victorian Trades Hall Council, Women’s Trade Union Convention, 1913, Minutes. University of Melbourne Archives.
Chapter One locates women at work in Melbourne in the last decades of the nineteenth century and investigates their informal responses to paid work in a non-unionised setting. Using the records of the Guest Biscuit Factory between 1888 and 1898, it has been possible to make a detailed analysis of their work processes and the work patterns of a group of young, unskilled girls. It thereby illustrates the nature of sexual division in the workplace and its influence on women's experience of paid work.

Chapter Two charts the rise of feminist and political consciousness among women in the Victorian Labor Party and the contemporaneous development of female unions between the founding of the Women's Organising Committee in 1903 and the second Labor Women's Convention in September 1912. It traces the beginnings of the conflict between class and gender, the result of a growing confidence among several prominent Labor women following their success in establishing women's unions. As they started to challenge the male dominance of women's activities by the Party hierarchy, their demands for more representation in the Party to give effect to their policies is shown to have caused long-term divisions between Labor women.

Chapter Three discusses the escalation of conflict between feminist aims and Party solidarity, as displayed by the 1912 Labor Women's Convention and the equal pay controversy during 1912 and 1913. It is shown that Labor women fought vigorously against the prevailing forces of political pragmatism and patriarchal ideology, forces which ultimately they could not defeat.
CHAPTER ONE:
STRATEGIES OF FEMALE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS
IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY MELBOURNE:
A CASE STUDY OF THE
GUEST BISCUIT FACTORY, 1888-1899

This is an examination of the position of women in the workforce in the late nineteenth century which focuses specifically on a group of young women at work at the Guest biscuit factory in Melbourne from 1888 to 1899. It will provide a qualitative insight into the effects of the sexual division of the labour market as a whole and of the workplace in particular, on women’s experience of work and their response to unsatisfactory conditions. This period has been chosen not only for the detail found in the company’s records, but also for the variety of economic factors it encompasses. The study spans the last years of the boom, the depression of the 1890s and the slow recovery at the end of the decade. The changing economic and social climate in Melbourne during these years contributed greatly to the experiences of women workers, influencing factors such as the availability and type of work performed, wage levels and the response of workers to unfavourable working conditions. The study will begin with a summary of the economic climate in Victoria in the late nineteenth century, the location of women in the workforce and the influence of such factors in the evaluation of women’s response to their working conditions in the context of ‘informal militancy’.

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The Victorian economy had always had a commercial basis, which grew from pastoral pursuits in the early nineteenth century to mining and agriculture and, after the 1850’s gold rush with its attendant population increase, the production of goods for the local consumer market.¹ Tallowmakers, tanners, fellmongers and slaughter houses set up works along the banks of the Yarra before the gold rush, and later, breweries and flour mills were established to service the consumer markets on the gold fields.² In the early 1860s, the return of gold miners to the city swelled the demand for everyday items such as

² Ibid., p. 44.
food, clothing, boots and furniture which were manufactured in small factories and workshops scattered among Melbourne’s inner city suburbs such as Richmond and Collingwood. 3 Victorian manufacturing soon surpassed that of the other colonies with the major employment opportunities offered in breweries, clothing factories, boot factories, iron foundries and engineering works, joineries, saw mills and brick works. 4

Factories at this time were small operations which employed only a few hands with only minor distinction between employer and workers. 5 In such small-scale enterprises employers maintained close relations with their skilled employees, as they shared a mutual interest in tariff protection and a common allegiance to various craft associations and friendly societies. 6 However, the sustained growth in secondary industry towards the end of the century brought about a change in employer-employee relations in some establishments as the size of factories increased. The growth in technology brought new methods of production which demanded more rigorous forms of management in contrast to the informal, familiar style in the smaller workrooms and factories. Whereas a system of wage labour had been present in Victoria from colonisation, the development of an industrial workforce in a capitalist wage labour system required some adjustment of the part of workers, unfamiliar with employers’ intensified demands for regular attendance, efficiency and discipline.

In the industrialising centres of Europe, Britain and the United States, the transition had proved particularly difficult in the face of long established pre-industrial moralities and traditions where the distinction between work and leisure was not so marked. 7 The new breed of industrial capitalist employers in those countries sought to impose standards of behaviour best suited to the rhythm and

3 Ibid.


5 Davison, Marvellous Melbourne, p. 41.

6 Ibid.

order of factory production and wage labour. Their task was to replace the patterns of work and leisure of a pre-industrial populace with obedience to regular working hours and the bourgeois values of thrift, toil and sobriety. Such qualities conflicted with the irregularity of traditional work patterns which observed many feast days, fairs and holidays and, most often, 'Saint Monday' after weekend drinking.

The experience of Victorian workers differed from that of their counterparts in Europe and the United States in several ways. The problems of transition from a pre-industrial economy to the rigours of factory discipline and the wage labour system in a modern capitalist economy in Europe and America were far more complex than the conditions faced by workers in this study. Such workers as those in the Guest factory were not a pool of traditional village craftsmen and women whose skilled status was under threat, nor were they required to work in large, highly mechanised factories as existed in other countries. In comparison, workers in Victoria were young, relatively inexperienced and faced a far slower transition.

It was not until well into the twentieth century that the Victorian economy reached industrial maturity. Nevertheless, the latter decades of the nineteenth century constituted a period of significant growth compared with the pre-goldrush era. The accelerated development of the Australian economy as a whole in the late nineteenth century has been referred to by historians as the first 'Long Boom' between 1861 and 1891, broken sporadically by short bouts of recession. Between 1861 and 1871, the Victorian population rose from 537,847 people with 472 factories in operation, to nearly three quarters of a million people and twice as many factories. Between 1870 and 1890 the population

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9 Ibid.


11 Ibid.

continued to grow as did the number of factories and the workforce employed within them. In the mid 1880s Victoria's population approached a million people, with 1,949 factories in operation which employed 39,506 people.\(^{13}\) The highest growth was achieved in 1890 when the Victorian population reached over a million people and over 3,000 factories employed 47,813 people.\(^{14}\)

Population growth in Victoria was concentrated in Melbourne, which absorbed four times as many people in the 1880s as did the rest of Victoria.\(^{15}\) With the decline of gold, few Victorian rural towns were able to sustain the expansion achieved during the gold rush period.\(^{16}\) The process of urban transformation in Melbourne was more grand and rapid than in other colonial cities.\(^{17}\) As the leading financial and commercial centre of Australia, Melbourne attracted an influx of British capital. The city's massive population increase demanded the development of more services and public utilities. In particular, expansion occurred in the construction, transport and communications industries which stimulated a variety of subsidiary manufacturing industries and trades as the economy diversified. In the 1891 census, manufacturing had become a dominant area of employment, second only to agricultural and pastoral pursuits.\(^{18}\) Increased government investment in public works and the great expansion of the building industry during the land boom of the 'eighties stimulated a high demand for the services of unskilled workers as well as craftsmen. The wages of unskilled workers have been estimated to have risen to 7s or 8s a day, far above wages in Britain and closer to the amounts paid to skilled artisans who could earn around 10s or 12s a day.\(^{19}\)

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14 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 186.
18 The major occupational groupings in the 1891 census were manufacturing 96013, construction and building 71114, and agricultural and pastoral activity, N.G. Butlin. Investment in Australian Economic Development, p. 196.
Economic historians have characterised the years of economic growth in Victoria prior to the 1890s Depression as those of rising prosperity and opportunity for all. These were 'the golden years' in which the 'populace as a whole...profited by the sustained expansion'.20 The economic historian, N.G. Butlin, has spoken of the 'growing power of the trade unions [and] the relative ease in securing wage increases' in the 1870s and 1880s.21 One writer has posed the 1880s as a time of particular economic advancement for women.22 However recent studies of working-class family life have suggested that the prosperity of 'Marvellous Melbourne' was more apparent than real for many members of the working class.23

The revisionist's study of working-class family life has examined the local urban economy and the structure of the labour market in relation to family formation, wage levels and social conditions. By examining the level of real incomes of unskilled workers rather than nominal wage rates, the precarious existence of families reliant on the wages of an unskilled breadwinner, who in turn was reliant on a highly seasonal and casual demand for his labour, has been illustrated. Such studies have shown the erosion of wages through intermittent employment and the economic hardship and strain placed on family life as the result of such underemployment. This had significant implications for women's labour in the working-class.

Many workers were concentrated in the highly seasonal pastoral and agricultural sectors in which the majority were offered only temporary work. In off-peak seasons this led to an influx of workers to

urban centres in search of work which could be equally irregular.24 One study of working-class family economy has shown that in such circumstances the search for work often caused high levels of family mobility.25 Such families led an unsteady lifestyle with no permanent address, work or education for the children. In other cases, however, families and individuals became tied to the crowded inner city suburbs to compete for employment in factories which was often offered only on a daily or weekly basis.26 In industries like construction and shipping and in manufacturing industries like clothing and food-processing, the demand for labour was also highly seasonal and erratic.27 Such studies have shown that despite the apparent high wage levels of unskilled workers, their underemployment in factories did not necessarily result in a steady or rising income.28 Government statistician and historian T.A. Coghlan found that in the late 1870s very few men actually received standard wage rates.29  

With the onset of economic depression after 1891, unskilled workers employed in building and construction suffered greatly as their wages fell faster than those in manufacturing, although factory workers' wages also dropped steadily between 1891 and 1901.30 The early 1890s saw a great decline in the level of economic activity in the colony. By 1894 over 12,000 factory jobs were lost and around 300 factories had closed.31 Whereas unskilled labour had fared well relative to skilled labour in some cases in the pre-1890 economy, the early 1890s were harsh years which favoured skilled labour.32 The depression cruelly highlighted the differences in the economic fortunes of working-class families, especially those with unskilled breadwinners. Principal areas of decline were brickmaking, carpentry,

24 Lee and Fahey, 'A Boom for Whom', p. 7.
26 Ibid., p. 154, 156.
27 Ibid., pp. 154-155.
28 Ibid., p. 161.
30 McCarthy, 'Wages in Australia', p. 61; 65.
32 McCarthy, 'Wages in Australia', p. 74.
carriages, foundries, ironworks, flour mills, and furniture, while the clothing and construction industries were hit hardest of all.\textsuperscript{33} Coghlan reported a 'large number of unemployed and partially employed persons, either destitute or on the verge of destitution' reliant on private charitable institutions for food and clothing.\textsuperscript{34}

Within four years, the economy was on the path to recovery. Wage levels began to recover from 1896, but did not reach 1891 levels until 1901.\textsuperscript{35} In the 12 months from 1895-1896, the number of registered factories increased from 2573 to 3370 and the number of persons employed rose from 36,027 to 40,814.\textsuperscript{36} In 1896 Wages Boards were established to fix the wages in four industries seen as particularly poorly paid and abusive: bread baking, clothing, furniture and boots.\textsuperscript{37}

Cautious of the problem of examining working-class life at this time, one historian has cautioned that 'labour was not a homogeneous commodity and that the experience of skilled and unskilled labour differed markedly in this period.'\textsuperscript{38} However, there is a further distinction to be made: that of gender. The experience of unskilled women in the workforce also differed markedly from that of unskilled men and much less is known of how women fared in this period. The following study of a specific group of women factory workers at the Guest biscuit factory will contribute to our knowledge of working-class women's entry into the industrial labour force for the first time, their working conditions and response to those conditions. It is, however, first necessary to place women's paid labour within the economic and social context of the time. Which women worked, in what industries, for how much, and in what circumstances are all important factors for they indicate how women's subordinate position in the labour market conditioned their behaviour and are significant in the evaluation of women's adaptive strategies in the face of industrial work conditions.

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\textsuperscript{34} Coghlan, \textit{Labour and Industry}, pp. 2047-2048.
\textsuperscript{35} McCarthy, 'Wages in Australia', p. 70.
It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the participation of women in the labour market and the composition of the female labour market in colonial Victoria. A recent critique of the statistical data available has argued that such data has both underenumerated and ignored the extent of female involvement in the paid workforce.\textsuperscript{39} For example, in the clothing industry, a large proportion of the work was carried out by 'outworkers' in their own homes or in small workshops but these women were excluded from the Statistical Register because their work did not conform to accepted notions of paid factory work.\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, women working on farms were seen to perform an unpaid labour of love, not worthy of statistical enumeration.\textsuperscript{41} The vagueness of census occupational categories and the extent to which it stressed the male role in the workforce as primary breadwinner and excluded many married women from productive categories has further added to the distortion.\textsuperscript{42} Nevertheless colonial census data remain the single substantial aggregate record of women's labour in the nineteenth century and in this way serve as 'a second-best approximation rather than an accurate representation'.\textsuperscript{43}

By the late 1880s, when the Guest study begins, the participation of women in the industrial workforce was certainly not an entirely new phenomenon. In fact, early concern over their presence was reflected in the Factory and Shops Act 1874 which sought to regulate the hours and conditions of the employment of women and children in factories. With the growth in the manufacturing industry in the

\textsuperscript{38} Davison, 'Marvellous Melbourne', p. 74.

\textsuperscript{39} Katrina Alford, 'Colonial women's employment as seen by nineteenth-century statisticians and twentieth-century economic historians', \textit{Working Papers in Economic History}, No. 65, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, April, 1896.


\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 7.
1870s and 1880s, new avenues for paid work became available to women, as employers sought cheap, unskilled workers for their factories. W.A. Sinclair has found that the greatest growth in the female workforce in Melbourne occurred in the decade 1871-1881.\textsuperscript{44} The period between 1871 and 1891 also saw the greatest increase in women's wages, when domestic servants' wages rose by 37% and factory workers' wages rose by 50%.\textsuperscript{45}

T.A. Coghlan estimated that female factory workers' wages were half or less than half of the male wage, and women in teaching and other professions earned between 20% and 50% less than the male rate.\textsuperscript{46} Domestic servants were estimated to earn between 12s and 15s a week, and cooks 20s to 27s a week.\textsuperscript{47} He claimed that in 1891 women in industry earned on average 17s a week in all classes of work, a rate which was identical to the wages paid in the decade earlier. With the cost of board and lodging in Melbourne estimated at 14s a week, female wages barely approached subsistence level.\textsuperscript{48}

However, in view of the prevalence of the use of piece-rates in industries which employed women, particularly the clothing trade, Coghlan's estimates appear inflated. The seasonality of manufacturing employment and the large-scale employment of outworkers on far less than industry log prices also meant that women commonly earned below 17s a week. A Victorian government inquiry into the sweating system in 1890 found that many women outworkers were the sole breadwinners in their families and toiled in wretched conditions for as little as 11s a week for 55 hours work, although many women were found to work up to 70 or 80 hours a week to support their families.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{44} W.A. Sinclair, 'Women and Economic Change in Melbourne 1871-1921', \textit{Historical Studies}, Vol. 20, No. 9, October, 1982, table 3, p. 282.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.}, table 4, p. 285.

\textsuperscript{46} Coghlan, \textit{Labour and Industry}, p. 1588.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 1482.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}

In the industrial sector, women were employed predominantly in the various parts of the clothing and garment trades. Other areas of female employment included confectionery, preserved foods, laundries, boot-making, woollen mills, cardboard box-making, tobacco, printing, jewellery and meat works. By 1890, women constituted 15% of Victoria’s manufacturing workforce. With the continued diversification of the economy, and the greater availability of factory work for women, the proportion of women employed in domestic service compared with those in the industrial sector began to decline steadily. In 1871, 56.5% of women in the workforce were in domestic service, compared with 29.6% employed in manufacturing. In 1881, the number of women in domestic service dropped nearly 10% to 47% while the numbers of women in manufacturing rose to 37.3%. Despite the increased wages offered to domestic servants and high demand for their labour, women continued to show a marked preference for factory work.

Their apparent preference for factory work raised much debate in society concerning the conditions of their employment, and in particular, fear of the possible ill-effects of factory work on the health of the nation’s future wives and mothers. Various social reform groups became increasingly concerned about the plight of women ‘outworkers’ who finished garments in their own homes on piece rates, and the very low wages and long hours they endured. This concern was extended to the conditions in factories, about which the government received many alarming factory inspectors’ reports of exploitation among young women and children. This excerpt, taken from an 1884 report, is typical of the abuse of women’s labour found by inspectors. It concerns the employment of young women at work in a brush factory who were observed

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51 W.A. Sinclair, 'Women and Economic Change', Table 2, 'Industrial composition of the female workforce', p. 281.


[In a dimly lit store,...with scarcely room to move. In winter they were exposed to draughts from the open door, which was the principal source of light, and in summer...the premises were close, stuffy and unhealthy.]

Such conditions, the Inspector continued,

...for the purposes of decency, were in every sense objectionable. In factories where both sexes are employed, this neglect of all sanitary conditions may be attended with the worst possible results.

In 1882 a Royal Commission was established to investigate the working of the Victorian Factories Act, which resulted in further legislation to improve conditions with regard to sanitation, the separation of the sexes, minimum age requirements and the limitation of the hours of employment of juveniles and women. In a period of minimal unionisation among unskilled factory workers, young girls were seen as the worst victims 'helpless of themselves to resist the treatment to which they are only too frequently subjected'.

The poor position of women in industry, however, must be viewed in the context that domestic service remained the largest single category of female employment in the nineteenth century. It was not until 1911 that manufacturing surpassed domestic service as the dominant area of women’s employment. As such, women’s employment prospects were severely constrained. The long hours, low pay, arduous work and lack of leisure and privacy which domestic servants suffered have been well documented by historians. But when the only socially sanctioned role for women was that of wife/mother/homemaker, domestic service remained in the eyes of the middle class, a respectable and appropriate role for the daughters of the working class prior to marrying and raising their own families.

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54 Factory Report, V.P.P., 1884.
55 Ibid.
56 Ryan and Conlon, Gentle Invaders p. 38.
57 Factory Report, V.P.P., 1884.
58 Sinclair, 'Women and Economic Change', Table 2, p. 281.
59 See Chapter Three 'The Servant Problem' in Beverley Kingston, My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann.
If, as the statistics show, young women increasingly sought factory work as an alternative to domestic service, the fact that domestic service still remained the dominant form of employment for women reflected their limited options should factory work prove unsatisfactory. At a time when women began to seek greater freedom and more congenial work than domestic service, the prevailing social and sexual ideology of the period acted in opposition to their economic advancement. Paid employment was seen as only temporary for women, and their work performance was regarded as inferior to men's, which locked women into their subordinate position in the workforce. Such attitudes also associated appropriate women's work with service and domestic-oriented jobs, or for the better-educated, with the 'caring professions' such as nursing and teaching.  

Clear lines of sexual division had long been inherent within the Victorian labour market. For example, in 1890 a total of 128 industries were listed in the Victorian Register of Factories, but 88 were reported to employ no females at all. In the 1900-1901 register, out of 137 industries listed, men were employed in all but one, whereas women were not employed in 70. The sexual segmentation of industry was further illustrated by the high concentration of women in just a few of the industries in which they were employed. Of the 19,002 females employed in factories in 1900, 12,000 were concentrated in just two industries: clothing and tobacco. There was no comparable concentration of men in industry, but instead a far more even distribution across a wide variety of jobs.

The point here is that the severely limited employment options of women must have acted as an important influence on their avenues of resistance to the most onerous of work. The influence of such factors is clearly more significant than arguments about women's inherent, biological passivity which is purported to impede female militancy. The British historian, Kate Purcell, in an article 'Militancy and

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Acquiescence Amongst Women Workers’, has made a major contribution to challenging the myth of the passive woman worker.\textsuperscript{64} Although based on women workers in the twentieth century, Purcell’s analysis points to the need for close examination of the factors which \textit{differentiate} the work experiences of men and women. She argues that the sexually segmented labour market and concentration of women into low paid, low status jobs has a more important bearing on women’s response to work than the alleged innate passive tendencies of women which are said to favour stable, domestic life rather than the pursuit of industrial and political goals.\textsuperscript{65} To Purcell, ‘traditions of female employment and current rates of economic activity affect not only women’s activity \textit{per se}, but also their attitudes to, and experience of, employment.’\textsuperscript{66} Furthermore, she urges that factors inherent in the organisation and character of the particular industry concerned are integral to the explanation of levels of resistance.\textsuperscript{67}

The interpretation of militancy is also revised by Purcell. She utilises the concept of ‘informal militancy’ to refer to individual behaviour in a specific context which is appropriate to a short-term situation, in contrast to the formal and collective, confrontationist response of strikes, pickets and stop work meetings.\textsuperscript{68} In the non-union setting of most areas of women’s employment at the time, including the women’s workroom at the Guest factory, recognition of informal militancy is useful as a means of evaluating workers’ manifestations of resistance in their various forms and the factors which may inhibit militancy.

One major barrier to organised resistance among unskilled female workers, which made informal militancy important, was the elitist nature of the Victorian union movement from the mid to late nineteenth century. Guest’s young, unskilled workers of both sexes fell outside the ambit of the

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65 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 114.

66 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 119.

67 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 120.

68 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 124, 128.
organised union movement. For the most part of the period Victorian unionism was characterised by small, skilled craft unions whose members were exclusively adult male artisans. With high entrance fees, their behaviour was dominated by the desire to protect skilled workers' wages and jobs from the labour of unskilled men and women, including the Chinese. Unionism among unskilled labourers was more successful in non-feminine occupations such as shearing, mining, shipping and transport.

In the 1870s and 1880s, industrial unionism grew among urban male workers in the manufacturing sector, but it maintained much of the conservatism of the smaller craft unions. For example, in the 1870s unions were formed among the bootmakers, tailors, upholsterers, bricklayers, cabinet makers and agricultural implement makers. By 1888 it was estimated that Melbourne Trades Hall represented over 20,000 members of various trade and craft societies. The construction and shipping industries boasted an aggregate of between 4,000 and 5,000 members. The Bootmakers' Union was the largest artisans' union with around 700 members.

Other unions which covered skilled artisans, such as the Saddlers, Cigarmakers, Tailors, Typographical workers and Agricultural Implement Makers' Union, had much smaller membership, often fewer than 200 men. In the food and confectionery industry, other small unions like the Brewers, Maltsters, Coopers and Aerated Water Manufacturers were organised. The Bakers' Union, with 300

70 Ryan and Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, p. 69.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
members,\textsuperscript{78} may have covered a few workers at the Guest factory, but certainly no female workers, since baking was a male job.

Women workers at this time were offered no avenues of collective representation whatever. As Coghlan remarked ‘trade unionists as a whole took little interest in their women fellow-workers.’\textsuperscript{79} The earliest and most successful example of unionism among women workers was that of the Victorian Tailoresses’ Union which Coghlan claimed was formed as early as 1874 with about 300 members.\textsuperscript{80} The Tailoresses’ Union struck from December 1882 to March 1883 in response to an attempt by a large Melbourne clothing firm, Beath, Schiess and Company, to reduce piece rates and thereby reduce tailoresses’ wages levels substantially.\textsuperscript{81} The tailoresses were successful in gaining acceptance of their log by the company\textsuperscript{82} but the Union was shortlived. Although the membership of the Union was over 2000 at its peak,\textsuperscript{83} by 1891 it was said to have only 13 members.\textsuperscript{84}

The Tailoresses’ Union was exceptional. Although some writers have claimed that the establishment of the Tailoresses’ Union stimulated the growth of other industrial unions,\textsuperscript{85} it did not encourage the formation of other women’s unions or the inclusion of women into unions generally. The Tailoresses’ Union represented the more skilled section of women in the clothing trade and did not take an interest in the position of the large number of unskilled, sweated female labour or ‘outworkers’. With no recourse to formal union representation and only minimal government intervention in the determination of wage levels in a highly competitive labour market, women were therefore subject to their

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} Coghlan, Labour and Industry, p. 1588.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. 1472.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} Gollan, Radical and Working-Class Politics., p. 89.
\textsuperscript{84} Brooks, ‘Tailoresses’ Strike’, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{85} Ryan and Conlon, Gentle Invaders, p. 33.
The Guest biscuit Factory, William Street, Melbourne, 1881

The factory as shown on the company letter-head during the 1890s.

Source: T. B. Guest and Company, Biscuit Manufacturers,
McCarron Bird and Company, Melbourne, 1881.
University of Melbourne Archives.
employers' arbitrary form of wage determination and employment practices. In this category were the young female workers at the Guest biscuit factory.

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The following study focuses on the women workers at the Guest Biscuit Factory from 1888 to 1899. The examination of the factory where they were employed, the girls’ socio-economic background, their work process and the conditions within the factory are examined in an attempt to illustrate the significance of factors which, although unrelated to gender in themselves, nevertheless gave rise to gender-differentiated responses from both workers and their employer in a non-union setting.

The Guest Biscuit factory exemplified the growth of small workshops into large scale manufacturing enterprises as the Victorian economy grew in the late nineteenth century. The factory was founded in 1856 in an iron shed employing two men and three boys under the name of Barnes, Guest and Company. In 1858, when it became T.B. Guest and Company, it was the sole steam biscuit company in the colony and pioneered the first steam cutting machine and the first rolling machine for making biscuits.\(^6\) From such humble origins the factory grew to become Melbourne's second-largest biscuit company in the nineteenth century. By the 1890s the factory occupied an entire city block in William Street Melbourne, opposite the site of the Supreme Court. The original building was replaced by a two-storey building in William Street which was later destroyed by fire in January 1870. It was again rebuilt as the two-storey red and white brick premises which is described below as it was in 1880.\(^7\) After the purchase of additional land on the corner of William and Lonsdale Streets around 1883, the factory continued to expand. By the turn of the century the factory had relocated its works on a large site in North Melbourne and retained only offices on the William Street site.

\(^6\) Sutherland, *Victoria and its Metropolis*, p. 605.

Although the Guest Steam Biscuit Company was not the largest biscuit factory in Melbourne, it was still an important commercial enterprise in its day. In the 1880s only 6 factories manufactured biscuits. The industry leader was Swallow and Ariell Limited which was founded by Thomas Ariell in 1858. Swallow and Ariell produced a more diverse range of products such as preserved vegetables and canned fruits and had branches in Victorian country regions and all state capitals.

The Guest factory was divided into several sections. The clerical and sales office was at the front of the factory, and displayed Guest’s numerous awards for his biscuits from all over the world. In the early 1880s, the factory manufactured 34 different kinds of biscuits, such as the standard lines of ginger nuts, digestive and water biscuits, coffee and arrowroot biscuits, thin captains and rice biscuits as well as the special dessert lines including macaroons, Queen’s drops, cracknels, fruit cakes and block sponges. By the early 1890s, the factory produced over 50 varieties and had expanded its specialty, dessert goods.

The bakehouse, which measured 121 feet by 82 feet, was located in the basement and had a large light and ventilation shaft in the middle leading up to the roof. Here the preparation of the dough, mixing and cutting of the biscuits took place. This was all done by machines in consecutive stages, operated by one or two boys under the supervision of a foreman. A chute supplied the ingredients from the store room next door directly into the mixing machines. The mixture was then rolled flat by rolling machines, formed by three cutting machines into the correct shape and thickness and placed on long wire trays. Before the biscuits were sent into the large baking ovens, rows of boys sat on either side of the trays and checked them for uniformity of shape. The bakehouse had the capacity to produce one

88 Sutherland, *Victoria and its Metropolis* p. 588.
90 *T.B. Guest and Company*, 1880, pp. 5-12, 15-18.
91 The factory also sold treacle and aerated flour in bulk, and cabin bread and pilot bread in 100 pound lots. See factory price lists 1880s and 1890s. *T.B. Guest and Company* records, University of Melbourne Archives.
The boys at work at the cutting machines, 1881

The three mixers, each of which held 250 pounds of dough

The dough being conveyed through the rolling machines

and a half tons of biscuits a day. The coke-fired ovens which measured 30 feet by 12 feet required constant attention to maintain the correct temperature.

The bakehouse also had a small section where the ‘finer goods’ such as fancy biscuits and delicate cakes were made by skilled bakers, using standard ovens and small mixers and beaters invented by Guest. The bulk, however, was made on the production line.

Adjacent to the bakehouse, separated by coolers, were the stores where large vats of perishable goods were stored in bulk. Next to the storeroom were the boiler room and maintenance section housing the enormous steam engine which powered the factory. Nearby were machines which sifted the fruit and aerated the flour, a process which Guest claimed he had pioneered in the colony.

After the biscuits and cakes came out of the oven, they were hoisted in baskets by a steam lift to the top floor to the Packaging Room where they were spread out on long tables. After packaging, the biscuits were either stored or taken to the despatch area at street level. In 1881 the packaging was performed by boys, but by the late 1880s Guest employed girls in this section, which became known simply as the ‘Girls’ Department’.

Between 1888 and 1898, Guest employed altogether approximately 193 girls. The number of girls who worked there in any one week was only small, around ten or twelve, and was far fewer than the number of boys. Of the 193 girls who appear in the Engagement Books between 1888 and 1898, most were taken on at the age of sixteen. The youngest age was thirteen, but only three were taken on at that age. The few adult women were those who occupied the only female supervisory position as forewoman in the ‘Girl’s Department’.

It was a condition of employment that the girls were unmarried and Guest diligently policed that policy. None admitted to being married, and given their young age, it was unlikely that this was
the case. At this time, the Victorian female workforce employed in factories was comprised almost entirely of single women.

Some of the details recorded in the Engagement Book suggest that the girls were the young daughters of working-class families who enjoyed some measure of prosperity during Melbourne's economic boom period in the 1880s. Where both parents were present, Guest recorded only the father's occupation as the primary breadwinner and assumed that the mothers did no paid work. The occupations listed indicate a mix of unskilled, skilled and semi-skilled work, such as cab or engine driver, blacksmith, bricklayer, carpenter or bootmaker, although some were listed as 'on railways' or 'tramways' or as unspecified labourers. As previously mentioned, not all working-class families shared in the economic prosperity of the 1880s. However, such occupations suggest that the girls came from a more prosperous level within the working class, rather than the most depressed and poverty stricken working-class families. In the 1880s boom decade it appears that their families were among those who were well placed to take advantage of the high demand and high wage levels offered to unskilled and semi-skilled labour in Melbourne's expanding building and transport industries.

None of the girls came from families involved in the most marginal fields of casual labour such as hawkers, street cleaners or matchesellers. Such employment encouraged instability as families moved around in search of work, or while the male breadwinner searched alone, the family was left in poverty and without regular support for long periods or was totally deserted. However, for several reasons, it seems apparent that the families of the Guest girls did not suffer those kinds of strains. All were reported to have been living with at least one parent or adult family member. The great majority lived with both parents. Only 34 of the total reported living with their mother or relative only, and in such cases, several reported that their mothers took in laundry. None lived in lodgings and all resided in Melbourne's inner city suburbs, such as Collingwood, Richmond, Carlton, North Melbourne, South Melbourne, Port Melbourne and Footscray.

The records of re-engagement of the girls at the factory, which will be discussed below, also indicate that most of them maintained a permanent address in the years between periods of employment at the factory. The likelihood that they enjoyed some stability of family life is further suggested by their successful completion of schooling to the minimum age of thirteen. Under factory legislation Guest was not permitted to employ juveniles without a certificate of education and he rigorously sought such certificates from all his employees. The economic pressures upon children from very poor families to neglect schooling and contribute to the family economy, either within the home or outside it, and the family mobility demanded by seasonal and casual labour were strong impediments to the completion of even the most basic education certificate. The Guest girls' educational standard was quite remarkable in comparison with the interrupted schooling, high level of truancy and failure at exams which characterised the educational experience of many working-class children.

Although the girls appeared in some way more fortunate than other working-class adolescents, they were still required to contribute to the family income after leaving school. Despite their youth, almost all had already been in the workforce prior to employment at Guests. Only 25 had been 'at home' for a year or two after school before seeking their first job at the factory. It is possible that such girls had been employed as 'outworkers' or did laundry in their own homes, but Guest usually sought such information from them.

Despite the dominance of domestic service in the female labour market and the substantial increase in domestics' wages at this time, few of the Guest girls had worked as domestic servants. These girls therefore typified the statistical profile of the slow but steady decline in the numbers of single, working-class females available for domestic service.

94 See Royal Commission on Education, V.P.P., Vol No. 39, 1884.

95 See the South Australian study by Ian Davey, 'Growing up in a working-class community: school and work in Hindmarsh' in Patricia Grimshaw (etc. al. eds.,) Families in Colonial Australia, pp. 166-171.
Another factor contributing to this decline was that the standard of living of the more fortunate of working-class families began to rise with the increase in male incomes from 1870 onwards. The necessity for young girls to contribute some income to the household remained, but the need was not so desperate as to force them into the workforce immediately, or to accept any work however exploitive or abusive. To some degree it seems likely that these girls, like their parents, also wished to take advantage of the higher wages and new employment avenues which had opened up. As far as possible they sought more congenial and ‘respectable’ work as domestic service was increasingly seen as demeaning. Fifteen of the girls at Guests had left domestic service to work at the factory and only two returned to it later.

Despite the demand for women’s labour in factories, their more limited job options compared with men, as previously discussed, must have remained a significant factor affecting women’s decision to challenge the conditions of their employment in factories. For the Guest girls, their categories of past employment represented only a small range of jobs in areas which traditionally employed females, such as the clothing trades, domestic service, stationery and printing trades, bootmaking and confectionery.

Although they were young, most already had some previous work experience, however brief. Of the 161 prior occupations listed, 120 had experience in a factory or workshop. Sixty-one had worked at other biscuit factories such as Swallow and Ariell, Brockhoff, Walker and Gourlay. Other areas of employment had been in dressmaking, restaurant service, shops, printing and bookmaking factories.

Within the much smaller world of women’s employment, the Guest girls appeared to be a discriminating lot who demonstrated some knowledge of the pay and conditions in industries employing women and often went from job to job in search of the best position open to them. The girls’ high rate of turnover could also, to some degree, be viewed as a comment on the pay and conditions within the factory whereby they simply ‘voted with their feet’ and left.

97 See table of past occupations of women workers at the Guest biscuit factory, 1888-1898.
This behaviour was particularly reflected in the frequency with which the girls simply quit their job at Guests soon after employment. Between October 1888 and October 1889, Guest hired 33 girls. One half had left by the end of the month in which they were engaged, often within a week, and two-thirds had left within three months. From November 1889 to November 1890, of the 41 girls employed, over a half had left in the same month they were engaged and three quarters had left within three months. The late 1880s and early 1890s was a period of high female staff turnover. Their employer recorded no unfavourable comments as evidence of a confrontation with most of the girls who quit, other than ‘left same day’ or ‘left same week’ as in the case of Caroline Janiese, Annie Ford, Mary Conway and Matilda Buttress between September 1888 and March 1889. For those who stayed more than a day but less than a week, Guest just marked the date of their departure, as for Maud Maggs and Annie McInurmy who both stayed only three days in September 1889. Sarah Taylor simply ‘did not start’.  

There were, of course, other factors which could have accounted for the girls' high turnover rate, such as family illness or the seasonality of some of their fathers' work, particularly of the unskilled labourers. Some of the girls, however, had clearly established patterns of shifting between factory jobs. Harriet Robinson had spent 3 years at the Walker biscuit factory when she resigned that job to work at Guests in September 1889 at the age of fifteen. Within the next five months she had again changed jobs and returned to the Guest factory in February 1890. Her address did not change during this period. Alice Boston, aged 16, had worked in a laundry before she started at Guests in July 1890. Fifteen months later Boston had twice changed jobs before returning to Guests in December 1891. For Florence Lievers, aged 15, her job at Guests in February 1892 was her first. However

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99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 September, 1889, February 1890 Ibid.

103 July 1890, May 1891, December, 1891, Ibid.
by June 1893 she had left Guests and then returned again two months later.104

In the case of the many girls who were marked simply as having 'left' very soon after their employment and with no further explanation, it cannot be known for certain whether they, in this way, had marked their dissatisfaction with factory conditions. However it is significant that resignation was practised so commonly among the girls. It seems that it was an act regarded as the easiest and most normal response to their poor employment conditions. The ease with which workers could take their labour to other factories in a period of labour shortage made on-the-spot resignation a sensible form of protest, the potency of which was proportionate to the ease with which the employer could or could not find other workers.

T.B. Guest, like many factory owners, relied almost totally on cheap juvenile labour in his works. However, the late 1880s was a period when such workers were in high demand. A desperate shortage of female labour was complained of by employers in the boot trade.105 The Chief Inspector of Factories reported to Parliament in 1888 the practice common to both sexes of 'running about from one factory to another[,] from one class of work to another, instead of remaining and thoroughly learning a trade.'106

However, women's limited freedom of movement in the workforce meant that many of the girls who chose to quit as a protest at factory conditions and look elsewhere enjoyed a hollow victory. At least 18 of the girls employed at the Guest factory left and returned again between 1888 and 1899. For example, in 1890, 15 year old Susan Cole lived with her mother and sister in Carlton. In September she was employed by Guests on 9s a week. Less than 4 weeks later she quit for no apparent reason. Seven months later Cole returned to the factory and was re-employed on the same wage. In the next seven months she again quit, went elsewhere and returned to Guests on her former wage.107 Ettie

107 *E.B.*, 1888-1889.
Foote, also aged 15, of Richmond, began work at Guests in mid 1888 on 10s a week. Within 2 years she had left and had been re-employed by Guests in October 1890. Within 12 months she again quit and returned, in October 1891 on 12s a week.\textsuperscript{108} Mary Sullivan, 18, lived with her parents and younger sister in South Melbourne. Her father was a labourer. She began at Guests in November 1890 on 9s a week. She later left the factory to work as a 'servier' [domestic service] but returned to Guests in November 1892 on a wage of 10s a week. However Mary Sullivan did not stay. She was one of only 2 girls who left to 'go to service again'.\textsuperscript{109}

The girls' personal patterns of employment were, however, tempered by the fact that employment patterns of both employer and worker were subject to the seasonal demand for biscuits and the state of the colonial economy. A cyclical pattern of employment was evident in the years before the depression. Guest usually increased his staff in the months before Christmas. In 1890 the number of girls employed rose from 9 in October to 14 in December but dropped to 10 in January 1891.\textsuperscript{110} In November 1891 the number of girls increased from 12 to 16 in December and slipped back to 9 in January 1892.\textsuperscript{111} Fluctuations also occurred at other times of the year. In March 1890 Guest enlarged his total number of workers from 93 in January to 135, of whom 15 were girls. Within 2 months he laid off 10 boys and 6 girls.\textsuperscript{112}

The closure of factories for public holidays, annual holidays and repair and maintenance work also contributed to the irregularity of factory work.\textsuperscript{113} However, Guest did not enforce unpaid annual leave on his workers as he did not close the factory in the slack post-Christmas season. On one occasion he closed the factory for maintenance and whitewashing for one week in late June 1890, but on several occasions he granted paid holidays on public holidays, which was rare in the manufacturing

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Wages Book, (W.B.) T.B. Guest and Company Records, October, 1890-January 1891.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Lee and Fahey, 'A Boom for Whom?',\textit{ Labour History}, p. 12.
industry at that time. In 1890 workers were paid for Good Friday, their annual Picnic Day, three days off as part of marriage celebrations in the Guest family and a paid half day break in January 1891.

Guest did not pay his female workers as well as Swallow and Ariell and other employers. Between 1889 and 1891, 22 girls earned less when they started at Guest's than they claimed to have earned in their previous job. Only those with some years of biscuit making, icing or packing experience earned above 9s. Girls who had been 'at home' earned the lowest wages of all - 8s or 8/6. During these years, of the 89 girls he employed, 69 earned between 8s, 8/6 or 9s. Only 20 girls earned over 9s, ten of whom received 10s with the rest spread between 10/6, 12s and 12/6. Apart from the forewoman on 25s, Agnes Birch earned the highest wage of 14s for her icing work. All boys earned between 9s and 12s and the handful of adult supervisors had wages ranging from a minimum of 25s to 40s.

* * * *

The organisation of the workroom and the specific tasks performed therein are an integral factor in the analysis of the power relations present in a factory and have relevance beyond the nature or quality of the material item produced. It is of crucial importance in determining the human experience of work. In the 'Girl's Department' the girls' work process had a significant impact on their opportunities to release informally, as best they could, their boredom or frustration with their environment.

The 'Girls's Department' was located on the top floor of the factory, physically separated from the mixing, baking, storage and delivery areas where males were employed. In this section, between nine and twelve girls worked on the final preparation of the cakes and biscuits for sale. The packaging

114 Ibid.
115 W.B., 1889-1891.
116 E.B. 1888-1891. See table: 'Distribution of wages of female workers 1889-1891'. During these years 103 names appear in the Engagement Book, but 14 have been deducted: 8 were girls who had been re-engaged on the same rate and 6 girls' rates were not listed at all.
117 E.B., 1888-1891.
118 Information concerning the girls' employment conditions and work process has been gathered
and labelling work was a labour-intensive, more task-oriented job than the mechanised, streamlined mixing, cutting and baking departments where the boys worked. On the production line, the boys’ work was paced according to the speed and operating capacity of the machines, yet the girls’ manual work process was in part tied to the output of the machines. As they received the biscuits directly from the cooling racks in the bakehouse, they worked, with close supervision, and much pressure to wrap and label them efficiently and carefully. They were also responsible for icing and decorating some lines, as well as conducting a final quality control check and cleaning the recycled tins in time for re-packing.

As the factory produced over 50 varieties of goods, packaging and labelling by its very nature was an involved process. Unlike the present-day mechanised packaging of biscuits into small, light packages of modern plastic wrap, Guest’s traditional method used no labour saving equipment, and required much manual dexterity in order to fold the many different individual wrappers and labels into their precise shapes.

Before packing, for example, the girls laid the biscuits out on tables and stood on either side to check the quality and count quantities for particular orders. The multitude of wrappers were made of coloured or plain paper, tin foil, wax or manila paper which were glued, folded or tied in all manner of ways. Some lines were wrapped individually while others were placed directly into a variety of containers, each then colourfully labelled on all sides, date-stamped and addressed.

Within the confines of their top floor room, the girls stood side by side under the close supervision of the forewoman. Despite their small number, the importance of their work and the physical separation of the girls from the rest of the factory necessitated the presence of a management figure to oversee their work and report daily to foreman C.H. Judd or T.B. Guest himself.

from the Engagement Book, August 1888 to December 1898. Descriptions of the materials used in the workroom contained in the company’s Prices Book c.1890-1900 and a 4 page document titled "Miss Hill" dated 30/1/1899 which describes in some detail the work the girls performed at that time. Guest Company Records.
In contrast to the areas where the boys worked, the finished goods were delicate items, which required more careful handling than in the earlier stages. In view of the persistent negligence of the boys which Guest reported in his Engagement Books, the girls’ cheaper labour may not have been the only reason Guest had replaced boys with girls in this section, and this section alone, by the mid 1880s. The low incidence of breakages in the Girls’ Department contrasted with the high incidence of that in the boys’ areas, despite the fact that the fragility of the baked biscuits increased the risks of damage, regardless of whether the girls deliberately set out to break them or not.

Whereas the baking trays and utensils, brooms and brushes in the boys’ section easily became impromptu props for silly pranks or missiles, the girls had neither the space nor the access to items for such tomfoolery. The boys’ misdeeds, such as throwing dough, could often be rectified prior to baking and did not necessarily visibly ruin the goods. T.B. Guest’s concern for quality and his reputation as a fine biscuit maker placed further pressure on the girls, with whom responsibility for the final preparation of the goods rested. Great care had to be taken to prevent sugar and icing falling off during handling and the risk of spoiling meant all goods had to be packed away before the end of the day. In the long run, stale or damaged biscuits could not be sold or would attract customer complaints, as did wrongly labelled or date-stamped goods.

The girls’ workroom was tightly organised, particularly under the supervision of forewoman Kate Redmayne (later Ferguson) in the 1880s and part of the 1890s. The paramount rule was that the girls worked in rotation, not together, packing either cakes or biscuits into boxes or tins, but never at the same time. The reason for this was perhaps an attempt by Guest to organise the section on the same basis as a mechanised production line with a series of separate, consecutive processes performed in rotation and based on individual performance rather than a collective process. Responsibility for productivity in this section fell to the forewoman, who had wide powers to ensure efficiency and order.

The enforcement of workroom discipline and efficiency made the forewoman a powerful and important agent of Guest. She was required to know every facet of biscuit making, icing and packing, as well as to take responsibility for efficient time management in the section. Her position as a management
figure set her apart from the girls and there was no evidence of any familiarity between them. All of the forewomen employed by Guest were in their early to mid twenties. Although this left only a few years’ difference in age between themselves and some of the girls, their higher wage of 25s to 30s a week ensured their allegiance to Guest. The forewoman never acted as a mediator between the girls and their employer nor defended their actions.

One example of this occurred in October 1893. The foreman C.H. Judd mistakenly gave 16 year old Florrie Lievers Mrs Ferguson’s wages instead of her own. In the harsh economic climate of the depression, Lievers failed to own up to the overpayment. Although she did not exactly steal the money in the first place, she was sacked for ‘stealing’ as soon as the mistake was noticed. Lievers denied the accusation and disputed the amount involved, but her downfall came when Mrs Ferguson reported having seen her at the shops buying sweets - a sure sign of profligacy.

It was the forewoman, not Guest, who kept the Time Book and the list of late fines, which she handed daily to Guest or Judd. She alone knew each girl well enough to label them ‘intemperate’, ‘impudent’ or ‘lazy’. She also earned an extra 5s a week on top of her 30s a week to search the girls at the end of the day. No doubt all of these duties engendered animosity between the girls and their supervisor.

Alongside her role as a disciplinarian, the forewoman was also required to represent a matronly figure responsible for the moral wellbeing of the girls. In the case of 21 year old Lily Allen’s pregnancy, it was Mrs Ferguson who informed Judd of the girl’s condition in May 1894. Guest ordered regular reports on her progress and his main concern appeared to be Allen’s influence on the rest of the girls. He asked Mrs Ferguson to report whether ‘...present girls raise any objection to Miss A...[.]’. Although Guest directed that they ‘must not let her stop too long’, he did not sack her.

119 E.B., February, 1892. See note attached of 9/10/93.
120 Ibid., November, 1893.
122 Ibid.
with her mother in Clifton Hill and was employed on only 8s a week when she started there in 1891, but managed to stay until July 1895 before she left to be married.\textsuperscript{123}

When Kate Redmayne married the factory cellarman J.D. Ferguson in January 1893 and resigned, the importance of her role was reflected in Guest’s subsequent difficulty in finding a suitable replacement. Guest’s first act was to promote Agnes Birch from the packing room to the position.\textsuperscript{124} Birch had sufficient work experience, for she had worked at Swallow and Ariell Biscuit Company for four years before joining Guests in June 1889 aged 18.\textsuperscript{125} Despite her experience, Birch was unsuitable and lasted only eight months because she was unable to manage the other workers. She was given the ‘option’ of being dismissed or resuming her old position at 14s and obeying the new forewoman.\textsuperscript{126} Birch chose to remain. After the failure of promotion from within the section, in September Jane Banks aged 23 was employed as Birch’s replacement. Banks’ performance was worse than Birch’s. After a one month trial period, she was sacked. Guest believed that she was also an ineffectual manager and was ‘not a temperate woman’ in any case.\textsuperscript{127}

Fortunately the new Mrs Kate Ferguson agreed to return immediately on her former wage. Ferguson continued for four years until Guest reprimanded her for coming in up to two and a half hours late on some days. It was reported that Ferguson was not well, but Guest was not sympathetic. He had ‘...seen [her] in the streets...’. In February 1897 she was summarily sacked after at least 12 years as a most effective forewoman.\textsuperscript{128} Guest may well have lived to regret this action. The replacement he employed, Daisy Hill, was by far the least capable of all.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} W.B., 20 January, 1893.
\textsuperscript{125} E.B., June 1889.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 31 August 1893.
\textsuperscript{127} W.B., September 1893.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 12 February 1897. Kate Ferguson died in 1906 aged 40.
The long list of grievances Guest presented to Hill in January 1899 indicated that there existed many long-standing troubles in her section. She had been reprimanded 12 months previously for her poor performance. The failure of Hill to ensure that the girls worked in strict rotation was Guest’s major complaint, for this resulted in chaos in the workroom. Among the 26 charges were accusations of carelessness in handling, wrapping and labelling of goods. Lack of supervision had also allowed the girls to neglect the cleaning of sufficient bins and inferior goods had been sent out. Guest believed that Hill was ‘entirely ignorant of what was going on’ and that he had ‘given too much liberty to [her].’

The chaotic order of the room was not the result of Hill’s leniency or sympathy with the girls’ repetitious work. The girls merely took advantage of her mismanagement to backslide wherever they could. Hill was clearly no ally. She had repeatedly ignored Guest’s instructions to adhere strictly to overtime provisions in relation to the girls. In many instances she had either refused to allow girls the time off they were owed or told Guest that the girls had taken the time when they had not. She also would not let them see the Time Book. The girls also complained of her incivility, that she often kept them late each night before she searched them and that she had done so in public view. Guest feared that the girls would commence claiming overtime as a result.

The strict order Kate Redmayne achieved compared to the problems Daisy Hill created suggest that the girls’ obedience was very much a function of the personal competence of the forewoman, rather than any inbuilt docility on the part of the girls. Guest was perhaps mindful of this when he cautioned Hill in January 1899 that she must ‘...not trust too much to the girls’ and that he was ‘...getting afraid to

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129 The "Miss Hill" document also enumerates Guest’s criticisms of her. See also Guest’s comments in the Engagement Book, February 1897. Daisy Hill had formerly been at Swallow and Ariell for 12 years where she was in charge of the girls’ room where ‘stealing went on’ which she never reported. Remarkably Daisy Hill survived the criticism of her and remained at the factory until 1931 when she suddenly resigned. However, Guest noted upon her departure that she "had been useless for years" and was ‘kept...on out of pity’. Ibid.

130 Ibid.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.
trust you to have that position'. In the decade earlier under the rule of Kate Redmayne the girls' behaviour differed markedly. They would have been sacked for such carelessness. Redmayne's talent lay in her vigilance, which ensured that the girls worked individually in a competitive and pressured environment.

* * * *

The organisational sexual division of the workplace was matched by sexually differentiated forms of misbehaviour. The boys' socio-economic background was very similar to that of the girls, although many of the boys were taken on at thirteen years of age which was younger than the age of most of the girls when they started work. In the years of labour shortage the boys displayed a clear disregard for the threat of instant dismissal which they must have known to be forthcoming when they repeatedly committed the various acts of disobedience, being cheeky or neglect of duty.

A recurring problem for Guest was the exclusively male offence of stealing amongst the boys. They did not thieve major items, but usually only cakes and biscuits. It was an act which attracted no shame amongst the boys, for they were often caught together, red-handed, by the foreman. In 1889 Guest reflected his unwilling tolerance of it with the introduction of a fine of 2/6d for a first offence and dismissal if caught again. This rule was written at the front of the Engagement Book in 1890 with strict orders that it was to be read to, and by, all workers upon employment.

In all other cases, workers were subject 'to instant dismissal at any time without notice being given'. Guest reserved some discretion, stating that he would deal with workers '...as may be thought fit'. In practice this meant that punishments were generally tailored to suit the individual offence and indeed, the sex and position of the employee involved. Dismissal was not as often practised as threatened, since the factory could not feasibly operate with the wholesale dismissal of the staff every week, so high was the incidence of what was deemed misbehaviour. Thus the punishments Guest meted out were far less uniform than those prescribed in the front of the Engagement Book.

133 Ibid.
Thomas Bibby Guest, c.1888.
Source: T.B. Guest and Company Records, University of Melbourne Archives.
Stealing was the offence with which Guest was most lenient. For fifteen year old Frederick Pritchard, Guest noted in April 1889 ‘caught stealing...fined 2/6 and let resume’.\textsuperscript{134} In June and July 1888, seven boys were caught stealing. Three were fined 2/6 and three were discharged.\textsuperscript{135} Yet when James Kermin, 15, was ‘caught with cake’, he was ‘made to pay the price of it’ and not fined 2/6.\textsuperscript{136} No girl was ever reported for stealing. There is no evidence that the boys were searched, but the forewoman in the Girls’ Department searched the girls every night as they left. While the nightly search may account for their apparent honesty, it is also possible of course that they were more accomplished thieves and found it easier to hide goods in their many layers of clothing.

Alongside stealing, other pervasive problems were the boys’ carelessness, pranks and general tomfoolery, though the distinction between wilful disobedience and neglect was not always clear. In the late 1880s, in any one month, at least half-a-dozen boys would be fined for ‘carelessness’ and/or for throwing goods or tools. Common practices and their corresponding fines were ‘throwing dough 6d’, ‘throwing bins 3d’, ‘throwing biscuits 3d’, ‘breaking bins 6d’.\textsuperscript{137} When one boy was caught deliberately breaking a pane of glass worth 8/6, he was fined 6/- but not sacked.\textsuperscript{138}

To cover the entire gambit of misdemeanours, Guest developed a special vocabulary which indicated his displeasure, especially for less specific offences. ‘Impudence’, ‘rowdiness’ and ‘incompetence’ were among such indistinct charges, for which fines were not usually applied. The guilty boys were usually, after a trial period, sacked as ‘useless’. In August 1889, a boy named Perkins was sacked. Guest had ‘tried him 3 times’ but found him ‘too rowdy’.\textsuperscript{139} Master Williams was also given three chances in October 1889, but found to be ‘no good’.\textsuperscript{140} Howard Hughes, 14, was twice dismissed

\textsuperscript{134} E.B. April 1889.
\textsuperscript{135} W.B. June and July 1888.
\textsuperscript{136} E.B. April 1889.
\textsuperscript{137} For example, see Wages Book June and July 1889.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., August 1889.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., October 1889.
after Guest found his 'character very doubtful'. 141 Joseph Crewe, 14, was '...getting very impudent' and simply was '...too well fed and lazy'. 142

While most of his workers were teenagers, Guest also experienced problems with his more senior employees. His Flour Room Supervisor, Mr Jacques, who earned 25/-, was dismissed after four years for '...continued carelessness...always larking, unsteady. Given many chances to improve.' 143 In March 1898, Thomas McCarthy, 43, on a wage of two pounds, was dismissed as 'no good...too lazy for us'. 144 He was particularly concerned that the older boys or foremen should not hit the boys. On three occasions he instantly sacked workers for fighting and in February 1891 gave strict instructions that the boys were not to be hit regardless of their disobedience. 145

Although Guest's goal was to enforce strict standards of sobriety and obedience upon his workers, in the years of labour shortage he was forced to make compromises. Many of the boys who were repeatedly reprimanded for offences described above also received pay rises in the following weeks. In 1889 Guest granted 6d pay increases to the boys in June, July, May, October and December. Early in the following year they had also enjoyed several paid days and half days off. 146

In contrast to the repeated reprieves many of the boys were given, the girls were usually sacked for similar misdemeanours. In December 1889, for example, Rachel Hardy and Alice Boston were dismissed as 'useless' and 'careless'. 147 In May 1889 Emily McInnes was dismissed because she disobeyed orders. 148 Minnie Toohey 'damaged quality goods in bins with scoops' and was dismissed.

141 E.B. August 1890.
142 Ibid., September 1891.
143 W.B. August 1889.
144 E.B. March 1898.
145 W.B. 27 February 1891.
146 Ibid. June 1889-May 1890.
147 E.B. December 1889.
148 Ibid. May 1889.
in December 1890 and Martha Hughes was 'caught with dirty habits' in September 1895. However, the majority of sackings were marked merely as 'Not Wanted' or 'dismissed' with no further comment given. The nature of the girls' acts of defiance, whether through 'impudence', 'neglect of duty' or 'disobedience' in many cases may have been the result of individual incompetence. Yet the stultifying pressure of persistent surveillance, repetitious work, a hot and stuffy workroom and very low wages left little opportunity for personal job satisfaction, or incentive to consistent, dedicated application of work.

The girls who directly challenged the forewoman's authority provide a greater insight into the girls' dissatisfactions. In the midst of the Depression in January 1892, Maggie Sullivan, 15, was reprimanded for her carelessness. Sullivan's immediate response was to 'walk out of [the] place' rather than continue to work there. As one of the more skilled and more confident girls, Harriet Jane Robinson was a prime agitator. Soon after she began work at Guests, Robinson complained that she 'objected to standing up' all day and left. Guest labelled her as 'lazy'. Nevertheless Robinson regained her job in February 1890 and received a 6d rise in April along with Ettie Foote, another experienced worker. In September she 'refused to work' when Agnes Birch received a pay rise. Both Robinson and Foote were sacked as the ringleaders of discontent in the Girls' room. Although other girls were 'dissatisfied', and given to 'grumbling', Foote and Robinson were, more importantly, 'upsetting the order of the room'.

Foote and Robinson's agitations coincided with a period of widespread unrest within the factory immediately before the boys' strike occurred. In the later months of 1890 Guest had tightened

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152 W.B. April 18, 1890.
153 E.B. September 1890.
154 *Ibid*.
155 *Ibid*.
conditions in the factory. In May he laid off ten boys and six girls and also closed the factory completely for one week's maintenance.\textsuperscript{156} He had also not granted any further pay increases. The specific reasons were not recorded, but in October the boys mounted a strike.\textsuperscript{157} With the factory engine halted for the duration, five girls and probably many boys, were laid off as a result of the stoppage. The strike, however, only lasted three days, after which time the factory continued on as usual. As the busy Christmas month approached, Guest increased his staff and agreed to a 6d rise when approached by ten boys.\textsuperscript{158}

While there was also unrest in the Girls' Department at this time, their circumstances discouraged collective action similar to that of the boys. In the case of Foote and Robinson's agitations over wages in September, Guest had 'cleared them out' (a term he rarely used in relation to the dismissal of girls). In contrast, when the ten boys asked for the 6d pay rise in the aftermath of the strike, it was granted. Apart from Foote and Robinson, it appears that the girls did not individually or collectively ask Guest for a wage rise. It was seven years before it was again reported that any of the girls had complained specifically about wage levels. In July 1897, Maud and Jessie Spratt complained because other girls in the department were paid 7s a week and they were getting only 6s.\textsuperscript{159} Forewoman Hill reported that the Spratts' unrest was setting 'a bad example for the other girls' and in any case, they were 'very slovenly and untidy'.\textsuperscript{160}

Although the girls did not strike, they were not insensitive to the harsher conditions in the factory; they simply manifested their discontent more informally than did the boys, reflected in a high rate of resignations and lateness. Of the 38 girls employed in 1890, 19 had left by the end of the year and many stayed less than one week.\textsuperscript{161} The girls also displayed a rare spate of lateness at this time.

\textsuperscript{156} W.B. 31 June 1890.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 10 October 1890.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 12 December 1890.
\textsuperscript{159} E.B. July 1897.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{161} E.B. 1890.
Over half of them came in one or two hours late between June and September of that year.\footnote{162}

The overall lower incidence of aggressive misbehaviour and unrest in the Girls’ Department had provided Guest with employees more efficient and docile than the boys. Any early sign of trouble among the girls was immediately quashed. Agitation over conditions and wages or personal confrontation with the forewoman provoked immediate dismissal. In February 1897, Myra Wilson aged 17, lost her job because she was ‘unable to get along with forewoman’.\footnote{163} A year later Ethel Malcolm, 17, was dismissed when she ‘declined to do work ordered to’ by the forewoman.\footnote{164} The girls who were unwilling to risk unemployment by quitting the factory sought means of resistance in ways which would not necessarily cost them their jobs but may have made their work more endurable.

The much smaller female labour market and Guests’ cyclical demand for labour, as previously illustrated, were not the only restraints on the girls’ options for resistance, the most common of which was to quit the factory. Another more important restraint was the external force of the Victorian economy. The economic depression of the early 1890s exerted a far stronger disciplinary force on Guests’ employees than the penalties he imposed. During the depression years and in its aftermath, the incidence of absenteeism, lateness and insubordination almost disappeared in the factory - no doubt the result of workers’ heightened fears of dismissal, redundancy and unemployment - fears which were shared by both sexes.

The decline in the Victorian economy apparently began to affect the factory from around September 1892 and also influenced hours, wage levels and job vacancies. For example, on 26 February 1895, Guest introduced longer working hours. He ordered the boys to continue working the ovens until 5p.m. instead of 4.30p.m. His aim was to overcome the lost production between 4.30 and 5p.m. when work ceased to allow a small number of boys at the back of the ovens to leave on time. Guest announced that he would not tolerate ‘...this 8 hours punctual business’ as the factory was ‘trying to

\footnote{162} Ibid., June-September 1890. February 1894.

\footnote{163} Ibid., February 1897.

\footnote{164} Ibid., 1898.
keep our works and hands going at ridiculously low prices’. In his opinion, his employees ‘ought to be glad of the billet’.\textsuperscript{165}

In the case of female employment, Guest had taken on 38 new girls in 1890 and 24 in 1891. In 1892 he employed only another 6 girls, 12 in 1893, 2 in 1894 and 10 in 1895.\textsuperscript{166} In contrast to the high number of girls who left the factory between 1888 and 1891, only 5 girls did so voluntarily between 1892 and 1898.

Accompanying this decline in employment was an overall reduction in wages for all workers. In the years immediately prior to the Depression, male and female wages were at the most consistently high level they would reach for the rest of the century. However in September 1892, wages fell to 7s for all new females and 7/6 for all new males, regardless of age or experience.\textsuperscript{167} In early 1897, Guests paid only 6s to most of the new girls. These wage rates prevailed until 1898 when they started to slowly rise again.

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This specific case study of female workers at the Guest biscuit factory has examined the experiences of a group of young, unskilled women at work who were representative of the wider female experience of factory work in the late nineteenth century. Most of the young women who worked at Guests, had, it seemed, finished school and entered paid work because of their need to contribute to their upkeep within their family household. The great majority of the girls had not sought domestic employment, despite the high demand for domestic servants at that time. They had, instead, shown a distinct preference for factory employment and remained in factory work between periods of employment at the Guest factory.

\textsuperscript{165} W.B., 26 February 1898.

\textsuperscript{166} See graph showing employment of new female staff, 1890-1898.

\textsuperscript{167} See W.B., from September 1892.
This was a time when wage levels for unskilled workers were determined largely by the market forces of supply and demand. The various labour associations had not taken an interest in protecting unskilled workers, nor had they developed policies which could effectively combat employers' increasing reliance on cheap juvenile labour, for which there was much demand in the 1880s. The girls at the Guest factory did not, however, submit totally to their employer's avarice in the wages and conditions he offered. Conscious of the openings for female labour in specific areas of the manufacturing industry, most of the girls employed by T.B. Guest had sampled other factory work, thus displaying some degree of discretion in the type of work and wages they were willing to accept.

My study captured these young women during the period when they were employed by T.B. Guest and has explored their particular work environment. They were found to have participated in only one part of the work process within the factory which was exclusive to female employees: that of the menial, repetitive chores of packaging and labelling biscuits. Within the 'Girls' Department' they met with the rigours of factory discipline via the vigilance of the forewoman. Although much is now known about the harshness of factory life for females in general at this time, much less is known about how women coped in such circumstances.

This chapter has not focused purely on the conditions which were imposed on the women, but provided an insight into their responses to unsatisfactory conditions. Within the sexually divided workplace at Guests and the rigid sexual segmentation of the labour market overall, these young women were shown to have responded differently from the boys. This distinction is of major significance because when viewed in terms of the female experience of work, it challenges myths about the passivity of female workers. The specific constraints upon the women's ability to evade their employer's demands, or indeed to win improved conditions, compared with the boys, was shown to be very much the result of the influence of gender division. The women's lower wages, fewer employment opportunities, together with their employer's lower valuation of their worth and greater intolerance of their demands, left them in a more vulnerable position than the men. They therefore manifested signs of resistance in informal, individual measures which could bring no long-term gains. But faced with the knowledge that similar or worse conditions prevailed in other factories, alongside their disdain for domestic service as well as
the risk of unemployment, their acts of defiance did at least provide some release when no other form of protection was offered them.

Biscuit-making was not one of the areas in which women first became unionised in the following decade. Other industries with a high concentration of female workers were those which became the subject of the vigorous efforts made by women in the Labor Party to provide females with the protection of a union. There is little doubt that the problems described in this chapter would have persisted for many female workers for years to come. It is important, however, to recognise that women have a heritage of resistance to their exploitation - a heritage which Labor women sought to maintain in the early decades of the twentieth century.
CHAPTER TWO:
THE FIRST FEMALE INDUSTRIAL
AND POLITICAL ACTIVISTS IN THE
VICTORIAN LABOR PARTY 1900 - 1912

In the early years of the twentieth century, the Victorian Labor Party first formally expressed an interest in attracting the support of women. In 1903 it established a women's committee within the Party - the Women's Organising Committee (WOC) - to organise women's votes electorally and to represent their concerns. Over the next nine years, Labor women not only became actively involved in Party campaign work, but as a natural extension of these activities, also sought to organise female workers industrially. By 1912 the WOC had established a wide network of political support in Victoria, and some of its more prominent members had founded several female unions. In their capacity as leaders of female labour, the women who form the subject of the following chapter brought to the attention of the Labor Party the problems faced by female workers as the result of the low wages, long hours and harsh conditions they suffered in the workplace, and the discrimination they faced before the Wages Boards and Arbitration Courts of the new industrial relations system.

With the return to prosperity in Victoria after 1900, the prospects for protection from industrial and economic distress improved for many workers as society sought to enact measures which would bypass the conflict of the 1890s.

The increased acceptance of state regulation of economic and industrial life facilitated the establishment of various commonwealth and state industrial tribunals which were designed to ensure industrial tranquillity through the peaceful negotiation of disputes.

The defeat of the unions during the 1890s Depression provided the incentive for renewed efforts by the labour movement to enter the realm of parliamentary politics with the formation of a Labor Party. The experiences of the nascent Victorian Labor Party were, however, characterised by ineffective organisation, instability and the ever-changing alliances of the union movement, which saw the four
political ‘Labor Parties’ launched between 1891 and 1902.¹ In June 1902, the last of these metamorphoses, the Political Labor Council (PLC) of Victoria was formed. Although the PLC suffered severe organisational and financial difficulties in its early years, it achieved more united support from the unions than did its predecessors, particularly with its commitment to the extension of Wages Board legislation at the June 1902 Victorian election.²

In this period, the Trades Hall Council (THC) also set about reviving unionism in Victoria after the demise during the Depression of most of the unions formed during the 1870s and 1880s. By 1901 over 25 new unions had been formed and eight had been revived.³ The nature of the new union movement, however, had changed. In contrast to the elitist, craft-oriented unionism of the late nineteenth century, the THC now sought to organise unskilled and non-metropolitan workers. In 1911 over 100 unions were affiliated with the THC, many of which covered unskilled and semi-skilled occupations.⁴

The main concerns of the labour movement, both federally and in the states, reflected its faith in the pursuit of economic justice through judicial means. The Labor Party adopted policies which were intended to foster economic development and to satisfy workers’ demands for a fair share in renewed prosperity, such as the ‘new protection’, regulation of industry, social service legislation and industrial arbitration.⁵ Labour historian Robin Gollan has described the early Federal Labor Party as a Party which grew out of a movement that was implicitly directed against the basis of the capitalist system, but [which] became a party whose function was to modify the capitalist system and make it acceptable to the workers.⁶

² Ibid., pp. 307-308.
³ Ibid., pp. 305.
⁴ See, for example, the Trades Hall directory published in every issue of Labor Call, 1911.
⁶ Ibid., p. 153.
The Victorian PLC reflected the character of its national body in as much as it also espoused policies designed to ‘modify the capitalist system’, particularly in its social reform and industrial relations policies. Old age and invalid pensions, the expansion of the eight hours system, a minimum wage for all workers, free education, uniform industrial legislation and compulsory arbitration were among the policies of the PLC in the early 1900s.\(^7\)

It was in the area of social reform that Victorian women had first voiced their interest in the political sphere. With the state’s expanded role in public life came the introduction of social welfare legislation which impinged on many areas of working-class life, and in particular, the lives of women. Continuing in their late nineteenth century tradition, after 1900 the various women’s philanthropic, religious and moral reform societies appealed to the state for the increased provision of social services legislation protective of the family rights of women and children.

Social and demographic changes taking place were also factors which contributed to the heightened concern over ‘woman’s place’ in society and the enhanced status of the role of the wife and mother. The concentration of population in urban areas, the expansion of suburban living, the high marriage rate and low birth rate provided the basis for the modern nuclear family structure in which the domestic responsibilities of women were stressed.\(^8\) As women gave birth to smaller families and more importance was placed on child welfare and education, greater pressure was placed on women to provide the conditions for comfortable, sober and stable family life in the home. While the father took responsibility for the family’s economic support, the mother was to provide the emotional support which united the family.

As the work of Anthea Hyslop has shown, in this way women became both the ‘agents’ and the ‘objects’ of social reform movements in the early decades of the twentieth century.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) *Tocsin*, 23.7.1903, p.9.


\(^9\) Anthea Hyslop, ‘Agents and Objects. Women and Social Reform in Melbourne 1900-1914’,
came to be viewed as the site of morality and sobriety, the state increasingly intervened in women's household affairs. Kerreen Reiger has argued that in this period a redefinition of women's labour took place in which the role of mother was extended and glorified.\textsuperscript{10} This was represented by the proliferation of family-centred ideologies carried in a plethora of literature on 'scientific' household management and child-rearing directed at women.\textsuperscript{11} The significance of the domestic, family ideology was that it defined the context in which women viewed their role in society and hence their perceptions of women's need for political and industrial representation.

In the activities of groups such as the Women's Suffrage League, the Women's Progressive League and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, a non-party political stance was adopted. They believed their campaigns for moral, social and political reform could be secured above the realm of partisan politics. Women's suffrage was posed by the \textit{fin de siecle} feminists as a vehicle for imposing their altruistic, humanitarian goals upon the male-oriented legislature.\textsuperscript{12} Labor women differed in that, although they shared many of the non-party feminists' concerns, they pursued such goals within a commitment to the working-class political struggle.

* * * *

The establishment of the Women's Organising Committee (WOC) by the PLC in 1903 marked the first formal recognition by the Party of the need for a distinct women's body within the Labor party, to attract both female votes and represent women's interests. Women had always been eligible to become members of the Political Labor League branches in metropolitan and country areas, but their membership was not strong prior to the formation of the WOC.

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\textsuperscript{10} Kerreen Reiger, 'Women's Labour Redefined: Childbearing and Childrearing Advice in Australia, 1880-1930s', \textit{Ibid.}, p. 231.
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\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.}.
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Around the turn of the century, however, the labour movement was already sympathetic towards the goals of many of the women's rights groups and regularly reported their activities in the new Melbourne socialist newspaper *Tocsin* founded in 1897. *Tocsin* had been established and run by a co-operative society of unions, labour leagues and individual members and was edited by Bernard O'Dowd. In one of the first editions of *Tocsin* the editors responded to an anti-women's suffrage letter, claiming that 'women demand suffrage as a right, not as a concession'. The editors disclaimed the 'old objection' that women would either vote as directed by their husbands for the benefit of conservatism, or that they would not exercise the right at all. The editors cited figures from the South Australian state election which showed that in some parts of Adelaide more women voted than men.

*Tocsin*'s commitment to women's equality was further revealed in a remarkably enlightened statement on sex roles for that period. The editors stated that

> One of the first of woman's rights is the right to decide whether she will have a child or not, and when that right is obtained women will not necessarily be eternally minding babies all day and darning hose all night.

In addition to women's political rights, *Tocsin* also saw the necessity to 'stimulate women's trades unions into existence, to infuse something of a workers' esprit de corps...to jointly benefit in the long run both man and woman.'

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14 *Tocsin*, 21.10.1897. p.3.

15 *Ibid*.

16 *Ibid*.

17 *Ibid.*, 18.11.1897. p.4
Although much of our knowledge of first wave feminism has focused on the middle-class, non-party women’s reform groups and suffrage societies, a tradition of left-wing allegiance among women’s groups was already evident before 1900 in at least one women’s group - the Woman’s Political and Social Crusade (WPSC). The WPSC was apparently the first women’s group to work closely in support of the Labor Party in Victoria, although it was founded independently from the PLC in mid 1898 by its President Ada Turnbull, wife of Reverend Archibald Turnbull who founded the Labor Church.\textsuperscript{18} The Crusade was given a meeting room at Trades Hall where it held fortnightly meetings between 1898 and 1899 which were widely reported in the women’s column of \textit{Tocsin}.

The WPSC was a highly political women’s group which defined for itself an interest in a wide range of issues beyond women’s public equality. In July 1898 it campaigned strongly against Federation and for tariff protection for the Victorian economy alongside other Labor leaders.\textsuperscript{19} It proclaimed that it was ‘not a body for the benefit of women only, but a body of women working for the general political and social welfare of the community’\textsuperscript{20} and later re-drafted its original constitution specifically to that effect.\textsuperscript{21}

In this way the WPSC consciously sought to distance itself from the middle-class non-party women’s societies. It viewed the latter as narrow bodies which were ignorant of the real economic and political issues in society. During its anti-Federation campaign the WPSC attacked the Victorian Women’s Suffrage League for its neutrality on ‘such a momentous question.’\textsuperscript{22} The Crusade further differentiated its aims from other women’s groups by declaring that it functioned without the ‘obtrusive religiosity’ of those other bodies, particularly the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.\textsuperscript{23} In late 1898, for example, the WPSC was critical of the WCTU’s policy for the abolition of the employment

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, 7.7.1898. p.4. See also Burgmann, \textit{In Our Time}, pp. 116-117.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 26.5.1898. p.4
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, 7.7.1898. p.4
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}, 28.7.1898. p.5
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, 26.5.1898. p.4
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid.}, 7.7.1898. p.4
of barmaids in hotels. Mrs Press of the Crusade said that while the WPSC shared its concern over the ‘demon drink’, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union’s pious and self-righteous views ignored the real economic causes of drunkenness which demanded an economic solution.24

Despite the Crusade’s plan to involve itself in ‘solid work in judicial, industrial, statistical and political matters’ and so become a national women’s movement, in late 1900 it was reported that its membership had dropped to below fifteen women.25 The death of Ada Turnbull in 1899 may well have contributed to the decline of the WSPC, which, by the early 1900s, had ceased its regular correspondence with Tocsin.

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It was the extension of the federal franchise to women in 1902 which brought the PLC to its sudden recognition of the need to harness the women’s vote for the Labor Party. With the Federal elections forthcoming in December 1903, the PLC moved quickly to increase the female membership of PLC branches. The PLC’s desire to organise the women’s vote was also heightened by the campaigns against Labor which the conservative women’s group, the Australian Women’s National League, had begun.26 Labor leaders also saw that an unobtrusive and supportive women’s organisation could offer desperately needed fundraising and campaign networks for the party throughout Victoria. Such a need was accentuated by the serious organisational and financial difficulties which beset the Victorian Labor Party in the early 1900s.27

Despite the Party’s sympathy with the women’s suffrage cause, the PLC reflected the lack of serious consideration it had previously given to the political organisation of women in the months leading up to the election. The Central Executive was not at all certain of its options in this respect, as it grappled to

24 Ibid., 24.11.1898. p.5
26 McQueen, ‘Victoria’, p.318.
27 Ibid., pp. 298-299.
find the most effective and appropriate method to incorporate women into its male-dominated hierarchy. Although it already had women members in its branches, it had to increase that membership vastly, or at least secure the electoral support of women at the polling booth.

From the beginning, the concern of the PLC was to preserve the political unity of the sexes based on their common class allegiance. This position directly contrasted with non-party women’s groups, who sought to diminish the importance of class in their appeals. The PLC appeared unwilling to establish a sexually divided body within the Party, and as a result, did not consider the formation of a women’s committee as its first option.

Women members of the PLC immediately recognised the urgency of the organisation of women’s votes as their first priority. They urged women that in the selection of Labor candidates, they would return ‘men of decent morals...who are in favour of trade protection, industrial protection [and] moral protection’.²⁸ Labor women identified as their particular audience the 120,000 female breadwinners they estimated were in the workforce. Their task was to convert the ‘shameless ignorance or pathetic indifference’ of such women to an awareness of the united cause of men and women industrially in the political goals of the Labor Party.²⁹

Like the PLC, Labor women themselves did not at first seek the formation of its own women’s committee within the Party. Instead, they looked to the established networks of support of the women’s suffrage societies to provide the groundwork for the increased politicisation of Victorian women. They were critical of the long term utility of the non-party stance of women’s suffrage groups such as the United Council for Women’s Suffrage, the National Women’s Council and the Victorian Women’s Federation. Nevertheless, they praised their efforts ‘to make their influence of practical value along the lines of genuine reform.’³⁰ Labor women also viewed women’s suffrage groups as the

²⁸ *Tocsin*, 23.4.1903. p.10.
first bodies to campaign against Victoria’s ‘reactionary’ government and believed they would provide ‘a strong body of support to the male electors in the next state elections’.  

The one suffrage group to receive the exclusive yet short-lived endorsement of Labor women was Vida Goldstein’s Women’s Federal Political Association (WPA - known in Toecs in as the Melbourne Women’s Political Association), established in June 1903. Two months earlier, the women’s column in Toecs in published the WPA’s constitution, which it described as the most ‘democratic a platform one could expect from a body of women new to political campaign work’. Relations between the WOC and the suffrage groups were amicable at this time, in contrast to the WPSC’s opposition. It was reported that a meeting of women’s suffrage societies had tentatively recommended that women should be urged to join PLC branches as the best means of organising their votes.

With the improved relations between women’s suffrage groups and Labor women, the Central Executive of the PLC also looked more favourably upon the WPA. Perhaps a more important attraction was the immediate organisational support that the WPA offered the Party. In May 1903 a senior member of the Executive and Senate candidate, Stephen Barker, met with the WPA to discuss a recent WPA motion that it would adopt the PLC’s platform and recommend that its members join their local PLC branches. An agreement to this effect was apparently reached, but soon broke down when the WPA backed out. The WPA was dissatisfied with its proposed status within the PLC which it did not believe would permit both bodies to ‘confer as equals’.

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31 Ibid., 30.4.1903. p.8.
32 Ibid., 18.6.1903. p.5.
33 Ibid., 23.4.1903. p.10.
34 Ibid., 7.5.1903. p.5.
By the middle of the year Labor women were particularly concerned at the PLC's failure to plan a practical campaign to organise the women's vote. In July a deputation of thirteen women stated before a meeting of the Central Executive that in their opinion 'the PLC did not quite realise that the women's vote would be a factor in the forthcoming elections.' In response to that deputation the PLC called a meeting of all women branch members to discuss the establishment of a women's committee.

As a result of that meeting, in August 1903 recommendations were put to the Central Executive of the PLC by Labor women for the establishment of women's organising committee meetings in all rural and urban areas, the distribution of 5,000 leaflets specifically addressed to women and the appointment of a women's organiser funded by the PLC, together with a five pound donation. Women members at this stage also called on the PLC to cease holding meetings in hotels - no doubt an obvious barrier to women's participation.

The new committee, known as the Women's Committee of the PLC, was then officially affirmed at the PLC state conference in September 1903, as an organisation consisting of one woman from each PLC branch. Lillian Locke was appointed Honorary Secretary and consent was given for her employment as a paid political organiser. The objects of the new WOC defined were 'to increase the number of women members of the leagues, [and] to look after the interests of women in working with the men for the advancement of labour ideals'.

After official confirmation the WOC immediately revoked its earlier endorsement of the WPA. It stated that despite some similarity between the platforms of the WPA and the PLC.

37 Tocsin, 2.7.1903. p.3.
38 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
The Women’s Political Association ask you to vote irrespective of whether the candidate is a pledged Labour man or not; but the PLC women [ask all women] to join the PLC branch in their district, and help themselves by helping the workers to obtain Democratic legislation.42

In November 1903 Lillian Locke canvassed the support of country women in a tour of Central and Eastern Victoria, when she visited Korumburra, Raglan, Outtrim, Beaufort and Castlemaine.43 Although Locke reported during this tour that she found ‘an unreasoning prejudice against women taking part in public affairs’, her meetings were enthusiastic and well attended.44 In Outtrim, for example, 160 women joined the women’s branch of the PLC which Locke established. In Korumburra Locke found that prior to her visit women were unwilling to attend the men’s meetings. When she induced several women to speak at the meeting, she reported that it ‘caused some excitement, as it was an unusual thing in the history of Korumburra for women to take a part on the platform.’45

As women’s membership of the PLC began to grow, Labor women felt a more comprehensive organisation was needed. In December 1903 it recommended that three women from each branch should be allowed to join.46 While the women discussed their proposals with the Central Executive, the earlier Women’s Committee ceased operation temporarily in early 1904 and Locke’s appointment as women’s organiser was also delayed. In May 1904 a reconstituted WOC was formed which consisted of ten women appointed by the Central Executive, to which it was to submit monthly reports. It was not until March 1905 that Locke’s appointment took effect on a salary of three pounds a week.47

42 Ibid., 3.9.1903. p.6.
43 Ibid., 12.11.1903. p.5.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Merrifield Collection, untitled document, Item 5, pp. 7-8.
47 Ibid. This was half the sum paid to Tom Mann when he was employed by Trades Hall as an organiser six months prior to Locke’s appointment. McQueen, ‘Victoria’, p.319.
The formation of the WOC by the PLC was born of the political objectives of the PLC, for the purpose of bolstering the Party’s electoral support among women. The industrial organisation of women was, at best, only of secondary importance to Labor women at this time. In fact, the earliest interest in forming women’s unions came from the non-party women’s groups well before the WOC’s campaigns. In March 1898 Miss Heath of the WPSC had already organised the Houseworkers’ Association and worked towards the establishment of a Domestic Workers’ Union throughout the country and metropolitan area.\textsuperscript{48} Although Heath’s Houseworkers’ Union failed to thrive, in May 1903 the Victorian Women’s Federation carried on her initiative when it established the Victorian Domestic Workers’ Society with around 50 members.\textsuperscript{49} In the following month the Federation also formed a union of women clerks and typists.\textsuperscript{50}

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In its early years, relations between the WOC and the Central Executive were amicable. In 1907 and 1908 the WOC held successful fundraising bazaars for the PLC and conducted campaigns to attract women to the Labor Party in both country and metropolitan areas. It sought to inform women of the close association between Labor’s policies and the concerns of women and family life. In the first five years of its existence, the singular focus of the WOC was to raise the political consciousness of working-class women in its function as an educational, party political body.

In their bid to convince women of Labor’s commitment to improving the quality of working-class family life, Labor women proposed the ‘separate but equal’ definition of the nature of gender difference. This was similar ideology to that of the many various middle-class women’s philanthropic and reform groups in society.\textsuperscript{51} The resort to such an ideology, however, at once created problems for

\textsuperscript{48} Tocsin, 28.4.1898, p.4.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 14.5.1903, p.8.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 11.6.1903, p.8.
\textsuperscript{51} Kay Daniels and Mary Murnane, Uphill All the Way. A Documentary History of Women in Australia, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1980, pp. 261-262.
the WOC. The 'separate but equal' appeals of the first-wave feminist groups had as its basis the recognition of gender division within society as paramount over class allegiance.\textsuperscript{52} The value of such a belief to women's welfare groups was the added weight it gave to women's claims to greater political influence. The proposition that women were motivated by moral and humanitarian concerns rather than party-political goals was seen to widen the appeal of such groups beyond the narrow realm of party politics.\textsuperscript{53}

In contrast, Labor women used such ideology only to mark a primary distinction between the wide range of male political goals and those concerns which were 'women's issues', pertaining to the domestic and welfare areas. Unlike the non-party feminists, Labor women posed the different interests of men and women as being contained within the common, long-term working class political struggle. Their aim was to minimize any divergence of interest between the men and women of the Labor Party in securing such social reforms, and to represent the concept of 'women's issues' as merely a reflection of women's innate ability to appreciate those issues more keenly than men.

Labor women's commitment to their role as an educational body emanated from the widespread belief among WOC members that women's failure to support the Labor Party was only due to their ignorance of political and industrial issues. In 1907 a prominent WOC figure, Annie Whitham of the Swan Hill branch, explained to the men of the PLC that women should not be criticised for being politically apathetic or industrially acquiescent. Due to woman's traditional domestic role, Whitham claimed, 'politics and trades unionism had not yet entered her field of vision.'\textsuperscript{54} She continued that the work of the WOC would teach women that 'the wages problem and its solution is the same for the working woman as it is for the working man' and so make clearer to women the necessity of united class action in support of the Labor Party.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54} Labor Call, 17.10.1907. p.1.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
Between 1903 and 1912 the WOC was motivated by the beliefs expressed by Whitham. It confined its interests to ‘women’s issues’ and did not seek a greater role in the more complex affairs of party politics. Although the main focus of the WOC was on domestic and welfare issues, its concern over the quality of family life was, in fact, closely linked to wider issues of national economic and social policy. Two basic tenets of the Labor Party policy were racial homogeneity and natural population growth as part of the project of ‘nation building’, and they were embodied in the White Australia policy, and the ‘living wage’ for male workers. Over the past decade historians have made the connection between the detrimental impact on women’s wages of industrial awards based on such priorities.56

From the time of Justice Higgins’ 1907 Harvester ‘living wage’ decision, many other state and federal awards further extended sexual differentiation in wage determination, based on a belief in the inferiority of women’s work performance in comparison to men and the desirability of encouraging women’s domestic role in society. Labor women faced an enormous dilemma in reconciling their understanding of women’s economic exploitation with the labour movement’s vigilant protection of male workers’ wages and conditions against competition from women workers. In addition, they were confronted by the strong opposing force of the separate spheres ideology, which was to temper the radicalism of their demands.

A major ingredient in female wage determination was the prevailing consensus surrounding the need for homogeneous natural population growth due to the nation’s fear of domination by neighbouring Asian countries. The ‘populate or perish’ ideal elevated the importance of women’s maternal responsibilities in the family and so militated against reforms which would encourage women’s role in paid work. Likewise, population ideology facilitated the labour movement’s demands for a decent male wage.

The articulation of population ideology and its reflection in the denial of equal pay for women was not, however, the exclusive result of racist and sexist policies of the male-dominated labour movement, government and judiciary, with the intention of oppressing women. Labor women shared the ideologies on which the labour movement's demand for the male 'living wage' was based. Although it is true that the cheap female labour force created by the sexual differentiation of wages was most advantageous to capitalism, it was not, however, imposed upon the working class but was a product of class struggle.\textsuperscript{57}

In the political and social context of that period, it was very unlikely that a majority of Labor women would have challenged such fundamental social values. As Ann Curthoys has shown, there were strong material considerations behind the labour movement's apparent sexism.\textsuperscript{58} The reality of unrestricted fertility and its burdens, plus the deeply embedded notion of women's natural, biological role in childrearing, restricted women to casual or intermittent participation in the paid workforce.\textsuperscript{59} Therefore, Curthoys has argued, the labour movement's preoccupation with the organisation, skill and pay of male workers and the exclusion of women from those rights is not to be dismissed as the result of male sexism; it is a logical consequence of the man's greater likelihood of having to support dependents, itself ultimately a consequence of the ideology of motherhood which both men and women share.\textsuperscript{60}

Leading WOC member Ellen Mulcahy reflected the acceptance of that ideology in the WOC's aims at this time when she stated that


\textsuperscript{58} Curthoys, 'Explaining the Sexual Division of Labour', p.62.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Ibid.}
Equal pay for equal work means the world over the ability of men to marry and to demand that the worker of every degree [can] be in a position to maintain a decent home where woman will reign in her natural sphere as wife and mother.\textsuperscript{61}

After two years of active involvement in women’s unions, however, Mulcahy contradicted her earlier view. In 1912 she attacked ‘the ancient and patriarchal maxims that women are the "dependent sex", and are to rely on the male for care and protection’.\textsuperscript{62}

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As the WOC grew, however, so too did the scope of its concerns. With the increasing interest in women’s industrial conditions of some WOC members, a gulf began to emerge between the party-oriented women involved in the work of the PLC branches, and those who were involved in the industrial wing of the labour movement. The latter believed that the Party could not attract the votes of working-class women nor fulfil their demands without first achieving some backbone of industrial organisation capable of eliminating the exploitation of women workers. In 1909 WOC activist Minnie Felstead urged that the labour movement’s priorities should be ‘industrial unionism as a preliminary to the political [organisation of women]'\textsuperscript{63} Felstead’s approach was in direct contrast to that of Whiteman, who stated that ‘the labour question is a political question’ which would be answered by the ascent to power of a Labour government empowered to enact industrial legislation.\textsuperscript{64}

That section of the WOC more oriented toward the political wing of the movement was not totally divorced from women’s industrial interests, but had as their first priority the growth and maintenance of electoral support for the Party. Although it was conceded that women had not played a part in

\textsuperscript{61} Ellen Mulcahy, ‘Justice for Women’, \textit{Labor Call}, 5.5.10. p.3.


\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Labor Call}, 22.4.09. p.14.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Ibid.}, 17.10.1907. p.1.
establishing the industrial relations system, a majority of WOC members did not challenge the validity of that system. Rather, they sought to modify its worst aspects and teach women to utilise the benefits of unionism and the party system. These members believed that the offending aspects of both these male-dominated institutions could be reformed from within by the participation of women alongside men.

The continued subservience of the WOC to the political ends of the PLC, however, provided the basis of conflict both within the WOC and also in its external relations with the PLC. For a small core of WOC members, the committee’s denial of the divergent interests of men and women workers could not obscure the manifest gulf between the pay and conditions of the sexes and the injustices it perpetuated. The issue of the need for, and extent of, the reform of the existing economic and political hierarchies worsened the ideological gulf between WOC members, in which women heavily involved in female unions, such as Sara Lewis, Minnie Felstead and Ellen Mulcahy, fought with the more moderate women’s political activists, who were led by Annie Whitham. Lewis was the Secretary of the Female Hotel, Club, Restaurant and Caterers’ Employees’ Union; Felstead was Secretary of the Domestic Workers’ Union, and Ellen Mulcahy led the Women Bookbinders’ Union. All three, however, were involved in several unions at the one time. These women had gained first-hand knowledge of the exploitation of women workers and the frustration of women’s interests before the industrial tribunals, and this left them more sensitive to the gender divisions in the movement. In particular, they showed more awareness of the way the male hierarchies in the movement perpetuated the pursuit of male workers’ interests at the expense of the interests of female workers and the labour movement as a whole.

In July 1909 the first Victorian Labor Women’s Convention was held. This convention reflected the existing balance of power within the WOC and the state of its relations with the PLC. The election of Annie Whitham as President of the Convention revealed both her personal prominence in the WOC and the dominance of the political activists over the industrial activists. Of the 48 delegates, twice as many

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65 Ibid.
Group of Delegates at the Women's Labor Convention.

represented PLC branches compared with those sent from women’s unions. The strong urban contingent met with delegates from as far afield as Korumburra, Port Fairy, Mildura, Mansfield, Hamilton and Castlemaine.

Although it was a women’s convention, it was nevertheless presided over by the senior male officials of the PLC, who addressed the meeting at length. Junior Vice President of the PLC, H.E. Beard, thanked the WOC for its contribution to the Party, carried out in ‘an unobtrusive but very effective manner’. The state leader of the parliamentary party, G.M. Prendergast, echoed Beard’s sentiments when he praised the ‘self-sacrificing help of women’. Beard promised women that their continued support for the PLC would secure for them a sympathetic voice in parliament. He did not suggest that women themselves should stand as candidates, but that women should utilise their newly acquired franchise to ‘influence legislation’ in areas affecting children and the protection of females, which were concerns ‘particularly in the scope of women’. The federal leader of the Party, Andrew Fisher, welcomed ‘women’s splendid efforts...to make the world better and sweeter’. Women’s influence in politics, he believed, would ‘hasten the time when the land should be filled with real homes, and where by countless firesides would sit the loving families of Australia’.

Beard’s and Prendergast’s perceptions of the WOC’s purpose were shared by the majority of its members. Miss H.F. Powell referred to the meetings as a ‘body of women animated by humanitarian motives’. Whitham called on the Party to discharge its duty and assist the women of Australia in ‘rearing desirable citizens for the Commonwealth’. The proposals put forward by the women also

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67 Ibid., p.2.
68 Ibid., p.7.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 8.7.1909. p.2.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 1.7.09. p.7.
73 Ibid., p.7.
clearly reflected this kind of concern. Among the motions were those which called for increased attention to public health with the introduction of an improved public sanitation system, the appointment of female sanitation inspectors in factories and in public housing, the establishment of a national health scheme, the distribution of milk to school children, a ban on corporal punishment in schools, the introduction of domestic science classes for women in schools, state aid to expectant mothers and state-run maternity homes.74

With the bulk of the attention focused on welfare issues, discussion at the meeting turned to the industrial affairs of women only briefly. In particular, the WOC deplored the continued abuse of women’s labour in unhygienic conditions in clothing factories. They did not formulate any specific plan of action to pursue economic equality for women, but turned instead to parliament to provide the necessary protective legislation for such workers. On the third day of the convention a motion was moved which called for the extension of the Wages Board system to include all working women, especially those in country areas.75 None of the WOC’s proposals, however, imposed any obligations on the Trades Hall Council (THC) or the PLC.

The only contentious matter was a dissident motion moved by Mrs Lohse of the women’s section of the Typographical Society. Lohse believed that ‘the time had arrived’ for women to form their own political organisation affiliated to the PLC in order to concentrate purely on women’s issues.76 After a lengthy discussion, the motion was defeated. Whitham had attacked it as a ‘dangerous departure’ from WOC policy, despite the mover’s claim that the proposed women’s organisation was not intended as a separate or rival body to the PLC.77 Instead, the convention passed a motion which supported in principle, the formation of women’s committees to work in conjunction with every PLC branch in the state ‘for the purpose of dealing with the political requirements of women as citizens.’78

76 *Ibid*.
77 *Ibid*.
78 *Ibid*.
It must be remembered that at this stage, whichever motion the women supported, the convention was powerless to implement any of its decisions. All proposals were purely recommendatory and subject to review by the Central Executive at the annual PLC conference. In terms of the power of Labor women to initiate action, the establishment of the WOC did little more than create the illusion of women’s equality in the Party. In effect, the WOC had little authority of its own beyond the most mundane administrative tasks. In most matters it could not act without the prior approval of the Central Executive. In 1911 individual WOC members were reprimanded by the Executive for offences such as sending out circulars without permission. As WOC finances were in control of the Executive, the women were required to make a formal request for funds and fully account for their expenses. On at least two occasions, WOC requests for money were refused.

Although the WOC finances were controlled by the Central Executive, the Executive did not take an interest in the methods by which the money it spent was raised by the WOC. Contrary to Humphrey McQueen’s assertion that PLC men controlled the WOC’s fundraising activities, it appears that fundraising was, in fact, viewed as a peculiarly female skill. As such, it was the one area of party work where the women were left entirely to their own devices. For the most part, they held traditional fundraising events, like fetes, fairs, dances and card nights, all of which were successful. In February 1910, for example, Ellen Mulcahy, then secretary of the WOC, offered her home for the first in a series of garden fetes known as the Labor Party’s annual ‘Pleasant Saturday Afternoon’. The Labor bazaars which the WOC organised between 1909 and 1912 were also highly profitable. The 1909 fair raised £350 thereby doubling the PLC’s income for that year. In later years, the women provided

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79 Ibid., 1.7.1909. p.2.
80 Central Executive of the PLC., Minute Book, June 1911-January 1914. 3.6.1911.
81 Ibid., 7.10.1911, 29.2.1911.
82 McQueen, ‘Victoria’, p.319.
84 McQueen, ‘Victoria’, p.319.
meals and refreshments as a fund-raising exercise at the PLC annual conferences. The WOC never questioned the men's disbursement of the money it worked so hard to raise. At this time its main concern in this respect was that some of the fund should be used to finance the appointment of more women organisers. In later decades, however, its successor, the Women's Central Organising Committee, would recall with resentment 'the want of money to carry out even the rudiments of organisation' in its early years.

Over the next few years, women such as Lewis, Mulcahy and Felstead continually expressed dissatisfaction with the limitations. In February 1910 Ellen Mulcahy observed that despite nine years of franchise, women had only recently presented an officially organised front. She called for 'a penetrating and continuous organisation' in contrast to the spasmodic nature of women's political organisations, which were only activated during elections and on special issues.

The organisational activities of Mulcahy, Felstead and Lewis led them to merge their political and industrial goals as they addressed many lunchtime meetings of women workers outside factories and workshops. They also spoke at meetings of established male unions in industries in which they hoped to improve conditions for women, either by forming a women's branch of the union or by encouraging women to support the existing union. They appeared in both their capacity as leaders of women unions and as members of the WOC, and urged women workers that they must organise themselves industrially, as well as support Labor electorally.

Between 1909 and 1911 the WOC engaged in a comprehensive organisational drive across Victoria. In 1911 Ellen Mulcahy covered enormous distances on the campaign trail for the Labor Party. In an exhaustive tour, Mulcahy spoke in Sydney in June, Daylesford in July, Warrnambool in August and the

85  PLC Minutes, 5.4.1912, 31.1.1914.
88  Ibid.
Ballarat region in September. It is difficult to ascertain how many members the WOC had. In the urban area it had representatives from most of the PLC branches, but it also had some rural branches, such as the Ballarat and Corio WOCs. Although by 1912 the WOC had established far-reaching networks among women members of PLC branches across the state, the organisation of women industrially lagged behind their political organisation. The bulk of the work was carried out by only a handful of skilled and energetic women, who devoted much personal energy and devotion to the cause.

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The exact number of women’s unions formed during this period and the size of their membership is impossible to pinpoint, as many received only brief mention in Labor Call while the larger unions gained most attention. The Trades Hall Directory usually listed only the more established women’s unions with no reference to the existence of others, in particular, the female sections of a male union, the formation of which the WOC had reported in small articles in Labor Call.

Prior to the formation of female workers’ own unions, the early representation of women in unions had been through the appointment of a spokeswoman to act as the guardian of women’s interests within the existing male union. This practice was especially prevalent in industries where women constituted a minority percentage of the workforce. At the Labor Women’s Convention in 1909 female union delegates attended from industries not commonly associated with women’s work, such as the Bricklayers’ Union, the Operative Stonemasons Union, the Fellmongers’ Union, the Marble and Stone Workers’ Union and the Undertakers’ Assistants’ Union. The only separate female union was the Domestic Workers’ Union. At the 1912 Convention this kind of internal representation continued for women in ‘male’ areas. Delegates were received from the Sawmillers’ Union, the Hawkers’ and Dealers’ Union, the Rural Workers’ Union and the Municipal Employees’ Union.

Throughout 1910 and 1911 there was an upsurge in the formation of separate women’s unions. Mulcahy and Felstead reported that they had begun organising women workers in areas such as hatmaking, jam, pickle and sauce factories, laundries, office cleaning, clerical work and in the boot, furniture and upholstery trades.\textsuperscript{92} These were exclusively women’s unions, established either separately from the male union or as a distinct women’s branch which co-existed alongside the men, and such unions were affiliated with the THC and PLC.

The formation of women’s unions clearly reflected the industrial composition of the female labour market at that time. Over the previous two decades, the percentage of the female workforce employed in the manufacturing sector had increased.\textsuperscript{93} In 1911 the percentage of the female workforce employed in manufacturing in Melbourne had risen from the 1891 level of 32.4\% to 43.6\%.\textsuperscript{94} The percentage of the female workforce employed in domestic service fell from 43.3\% in 1891 to 30.0\% in 1911.\textsuperscript{95} The average weekly wage of women in manufacturing was estimated to be 16 shillings compared with 40 shillings for men.\textsuperscript{96}

The distribution of the female industrial workforce had not altered much from the late nineteenth century, nor had the degree of sexual segmentation in the labour market. In 1909, the three largest occupational categories of women were: clothing, textiles and fibrous materials, 26,578; books, paper, printing and engraving, 2,068; and the preparation of food and drink, 3,718.\textsuperscript{97} These three categories accounted for the bulk of the 33,890 women in the industrial workforce.\textsuperscript{98} Another 1,526 were

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Victorian Yearbook}, 1909-1910, Government Printer, 1911, pp. 686-691.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
scattered in groups of between 100 and 200 workers in industries such as shipbuilding, vehicle manufacture, the preparation of drugs and chemicals, rubber and basketware, arms and explosives, furniture and bedding.\textsuperscript{99}

Of these unions, the earliest established and those which maintained the highest profile were in industries with a high concentration of women workers. The Domestic Workers' Union led by Minnie Felstead was apparently the only women's union formed in the early 1900s which maintained its existence, perhaps as a continuation of the Victorian Domestic Workers' Association formed in 1903.\textsuperscript{99} From 1908 onwards it was listed in the Trades Hall directory in \textit{Labor Call} under the leadership of Felstead. In the clothing industry, three women's unions were formed separately from the male Clothing Trades' Union. In February 1910, Mrs Stellner formed the Shirt and Collar Workers' Union, in October 1910 Mrs Wilkinson had started the Dressmakers' Union and Felstead began organising women whiteworkers in September 1910. A year later she formed the Amalgamated Garment Workers' Union.\textsuperscript{100} Other prominent female unions were the Confectioners' Union (September 1910 by Miss McGrath), the Women Bookbinders' Union (formed in October 1910 by Ellen Mulcahy) and the Female Hotel and Caterers' Union (January 1911 by Sara Lewis).\textsuperscript{101}

One women's union which reached a brief period of prominence in 1911 was the Matchworkers' Union. The union had some male members but the majority were women. At that time, it was one of the largest women's unions with nearly 400 members.\textsuperscript{102} Around 98\% of workers at the Bryant and May factory were unionised, an achievement aided by the concentration of its members in the one location.\textsuperscript{103} With sound finances and effective organisation, the Matchworkers' Union staged a strike

\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{100} These dates represent the earliest reference found in \textit{Labor Call} where the date of the union's original formation is not known. 24.2.1910, p.7, 20.10.1910, p.3, 29.9.1910, p.8, 26.10.1911, p.5.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ibid.}, 8.9.1910, p.5, 15.12.1910, p.7, 12.1.11, p.3.
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Argus}, 28.11.1911, p.6.
\textsuperscript{103} Jennifer Feeney, 'Matchgirls: Strikers at Bryant and May' in Marilyn Lake and Farley Kelly
at the Bryant and May factory in Richmond in November 1911. Thirty-six girls struck in response to the management's refusal to grant an increase in piece rates from 1s8d a crate to 2s. During the week-long strike action, a strike committee was formed which organised a picket line of three girls in two hourly shifts. Because many workers had been stood down as a result of the strike, it ended when the union accepted an offer of an additional 10d a crate on 8 December 1911.

By 1910 an unprecedented number of female unions existed, particularly in metropolitan areas. It was regularly reported in Labor Call that enthusiastic meetings had been held by tailoresses, laundresses, and domestic workers and that membership continued to grow. Associated bodies such as the Women Workers' Self-Help Fund and the Women's Strike Committee (formed to aid the Agricultural Implement Workers' Union's strike) were also operated by the WOC at this time and in 1913 a free employment agency and free typing classes were offered.

These unions operated along similar organisational lines to male unions: they held weekly meetings, social events, collected subscription fees and provided funds for relief during sickness and injury. They also played an important educational role in explaining to women the importance of worker


104 Argus, 28.11.1911, p.6.
105 Ibid.
106 Feeney, 'Matchgirls' p.266-267. In this article Feeney refers to the unknown identity of a woman who emerged as leader of the strike. It appears very likely that the woman was Minnie Webber, who later became secretary of the Matchworkers' Union in 1912 and 1913 and was probably related to Gordon Webber, leader of the Matchworkers' Union in 1911. Webber was already active in women's unions in 1911. In April 1911, she was involved in the Domestic Workers' Union with Minnie Felstead. Labor Call, 13.4.1911, p.3. It was also reported that the Australian Matchworkers' Union, the majority of whom were women, held a meeting in September, 1911. Ibid., 14.9.1911, p.1.

107 For example, the Tailoresses' Union held a meeting of 250 women in July 1911. In February 1911 both the Domestic Workers' Union and the Laundresses' Union reported large attendances at their meetings. Ibid., 27.7.1911, p.8, 16.2.1911, p.5, 27.2.1911, p.8. In 1912, however, under the leadership of Mrs Nicholson, the Domestic Workers' Union amalgamated with the Lewis's Female Hotel and Caterers' Employees' Union because its membership had dropped to below 18 and it could not continue through lack of funds. Melbourne Trades Hall Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, Vol.4, 1910-1912, 12, 15.3.1912.

solidarity and support for the Labor party. During this period, however, female industrial advocates learned that, as representatives of women's unions, they were not treated equally by the leadership of male unions. Such treatment encouraged a cautious view of male involvement in their unions, as women demonstrated sensitivity to the male orientation and male domination of the industrial relations sphere.

May Francis, socialist, feminist and founding member of the Militant Propagandists of the Labour Movement, achieved an early awareness of such problems when she first fought for the protection of women workers. Francis recalled that as a young woman her attempts to organise her fellow women workers in the clothing industry in 1910 earned her a reputation as an agitator with 'crazy ideas'.\textsuperscript{109} When she formed a small union among women at the Craig Williamson factory, the Secretary of the Cycle Trades Union, Jack Cosgrave, called it a 'scab union' because it was not affiliated with the THC. Later, when Francis approached the THC for affiliation, she found that its President, Charles Gray, believed that the women's efforts 'wouldn't amount to much anyway'.\textsuperscript{110} May Francis also noted the poor relations between herself and male union officials of the Clothing Trades' Union during her time on its executive committee. She claimed that she was continually opposed to the Clothing Trades' Union's policies and that her election to the union's executive was resented by the men. In particular, she recalled the difficulty she experienced in securing the appointment of a women's organiser by the Clothing Trades Union.\textsuperscript{111}

May Francis' experiences occurred as a result of her involvement as a female in a male dominated union. In the obverse case of the Women Bookbinders' Union (WBU), Ellen Mulcahy suffered bad relations with male unionists in her female-dominated union. The WBU, when established in October 1910, had as its object the 'preservation of a uniform scale of wages for weekly work, and to promote

\textsuperscript{109} May Brodney, 'Autobiographical Notes', pp. 10-16, Brodney Papers, MS 10882, Box 8, folder 23, La Trobe Library.

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid.}
the interests of the trade in its social, moral and industrial aspects. In late 1910 it had 395 members, roughly a fifth of the women employed in the industry at that time. Mulcahy, however, claimed that almost every girl in the bookbinding trade was a member. Her main concerns were the establishment of a Wages Board for women bookbinders, improved cleanliness and the removal of dangerous machinery in factories and a reduction of working hours, alleged to be as high as 61 hours a week in some private firms.

In 1911 Mulcahy accepted the offer from the Secretary of the male Bookbinders' and Paper Rulers' Society, Mr White, to act as the President of the women's union, as well as his offer to 'allow the men to fight their case.' She probably regretted this decision later. When White appeared for the women on the new Stationers' Wages Board in 1911, he proudly claimed that male bookbinders were the second highest paid in the Wages Board system and that he would pursue equal pay for women. However, when the Board met, White dropped the women's overall claim to the male wage of 20 shillings (except for sewers) and accepted the Board's offer of only 16 shillings. He later explained to a WBU meeting that he had intended to oppose the Board, but decided to 'let it pass', accept the lower offer and improve on it later.

In early 1912 the WBU reviewed its practice of allowing men to act as their advocates before the Wages Board while the women held only an administrative role. They had also experienced disruption of their meetings by male non-unionists. In response to these difficulties, Mulcahy moved that the

112 Women Bookbinders' Union, Minutes, October 1910-September 1911, 22.10.1910, Vol. I, MS 1150, Box 962/4, La Trobe Library.
113 Ibid., and Victorian Yearbook 1910 which estimated that 2068 females were employed in the category 'book, paper, printing, engraving & etc.' p.689.
115 Women Bookbinders' Union, Minutes, 27.10.1910.
118 Ibid., 26.1.1911.
union act ‘strictly as a women’s union’, allowing only women members, office-holders and women’s attendance at meetings. It also elected three women representatives to the Stationers’ Wages Board.119

In addition to the poor relations between male and female union officials, women’s unions were also subject to the institutionalised bias of government and Wages Board officials. Women union leaders found that their campaigns were hindered by the small regard with which such powerful personnel viewed their claims. In August 1910 Minnie Felstead of the Domestic Workers’ Union complained about the choice of the employee representatives on the Whiteworkers’ Wages Board and of the dismissive treatment her union had received following its objections.120 Felstead claimed that ‘apathetic’ employee representatives had been foisted on the Board by the Minister of Labour, despite the repeated objections of her union.121 Felstead charged that it was a ‘contemptible act’ which was in violation of the intention of the Factories Act.122 As further evidence of official disregard for her union, Felstead explained how the long-serving Chief Inspector of Factories, Harrison Ord, had treated her union’s objections. Ord had advised the Domestic Workers’ Union to lodge a petition of complaint with 190 signatures by the fourteenth of the month. He then later requested 220 signatures, but when the union duly lodged the petition by the fourteenth, he told them that it was too late.123 Felstead complained to the THC that the Minister had ‘denied a common courtesy to a recognised body, and had deliberately ignored a sworn declaration’.124

Furthermore, Felstead charged that factory inspectresses had tried to dissuade girls from signing the petition and urged them ‘to shun the union’.125 Mrs Powell of the Domestic Workers’ Union supported Felstead’s claims. Of the women appointed to the Whiteworkers’ Wages Board, she said

119 Ibid.
120 Labor Call, 18.8.1910, p.3.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
that one of them did not support the women’s claim to twenty shillings a week and the other was ‘so utterly ignorant of the welfare of those whom she represented, that she never sat on the board at all’. 126 Powell also claimed that both women denied the existence of sweating, as did Harrison Ord. 127

Nearly a year later, Felstead continued to protest at the treatment of women’s demands before the Wages Boards. In April 1911 Felstead moved a motion before the Trades Hall Council condemning the chairman of the Dressmakers’ Board for ‘scoffing’ at the union’s claim for a reasonable wage. 128 Felstead stated that when the employee representatives asked for 30s per week, ‘...the chairman of the board (Mr Reddan) sat back in his chair laughing and asked them if they were out for jokes’. 129 She said he then refused to discuss the issue of wages with them and stated that ‘one pound per week was sufficient for any woman’. 130 Felstead believed this was an affront to female workers, not only because of Reddan’s cavalier attitude toward them, but because of the skill involved in the job. 131 Trades Hall supported Felstead’s motion and the Executive Committee joined with her in a deputation to the Minister, although the outcome of that action is not known. 132

Felstead was also a critic of the effectiveness of the Factories Act in protecting women workers from exploitation. She drew attention to the practice of some employers of advertising nonexistent jobs in clothing factories. She complained that this not only gave a false impression of the demand for women’s labour, but, more importantly, it supplied employers with a pool of women from which they would replace those already employed by taking on the most desperate workers at the lowest rate. 133

126 Ibid.
127 Ibid., 13.4.1911, p.3.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid., 23.3.1911, p.7.
Angered by the fact that rulings by the Fitzroy Court and the Assistant Chief Inspector of Factories had both found the practice lawful under the Factories Act, Felstead called for stronger legislation to redress the situation.\textsuperscript{134}

In these years, Labor women found that the onus lay with them to first convince the Chief Inspector of Factories of the continued existence of sweating and the widespread abuse of female labour, despite their persistent appeals for reform in this area since the WOC’s inception. In this respect, Labor women demonstrated their superior knowledge of women’s industrial conditions compared with factory inspectors, and the personal rapport they had established between themselves and women workers.

For example, in 1889 the Chief Inspector of Factories complained of the difficulty experienced in eliciting information from females concerning breaches of the Factories Act. He stated that when anonymous complaints were received

\[\text{Although the girls are asked to state their grievances, they preserve a stolid silence or appear to endorse what their employer says. Men are generally ready to speak out and contradict their employer...but with women it is different. \textit{The girls have great objection to going to court. To take them there against their will would be to have unwilling witnesses.}}\textsuperscript{135}\]

With the protection afforded by the formation of women’s unions, their leaders had little difficulty gaining first hand information from women workers concerning their exploitation in the workforce.

In 1911 Felstead drew attention to the circumstances of the many ‘weary and hollow-eyed girls and women’ employed as outworkers in the clothing trades. Her investigations had revealed that these women worked long hours in ‘wretched tenements...amidst the accumulated litter of weeks for as little as 21/2d to 7d per item’.\textsuperscript{136} A month earlier in \textit{Labor Call}, Ellen Mulcahy had published an expose on the plight of female office cleaners. Mulcahy reported that such women, many of whom were sole

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Ibid.}


\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Labor Call}, 23.3.1911. p.7.
breadwinners, travelled long distances in the early hours of the morning and again in the late evening, for which they received between 10s and 15s a week for their arduous efforts.137

Such appeals, however, apparently fell on deaf ears. Miss Powell found that in her experience, whenever representations were made to the authorities concerning sweating ‘they refute it and take it as a purely personal attack [on their work].’ As a result of her repeated clashes with Harrison Ord over sweating, Powell and Ord had ‘agreed not to see each other’ again on the matter.138

* * * *

By 1912 Mulcahy, Felstead and Lewis had learned that despite their proven abilities in representing working-class interests, the Executives of the THC and PLC persistently displayed a domineering and patronising view of their activities. This was manifested time and again by the Executives of the PLC and THC in their rejection of women’s requests, in their signs of fear of female autonomy in women’s unions, and their unwillingness to grant greater female representation in the Party. At the same time, these conflicts with the male hierarchy of the labour movement greatly weakened the power and unity of the WOC as it grappled with the competing demands of women’s rights and Party discipline.

It would, however, be inaccurate to represent the WOC’s disunity as purely the result of its bad relations with the THC and PLC. Throughout the period of growth in women’s unions and membership in PLC branches, the WOC was also beset with internal divisions which added to the discord on the issue of autonomy. Such troubles were manifested in the personal disagreements and in-fighting among members which unfortunately occupied much of its time at meetings of the PLC and THC between 1911 and 1912.

In August 1911 a dispute broke out between Minnie Felstead, who was then Secretary of the WOC, and another member, Mrs Barry, over a letter and insinuations by the former about Barry’s association

137 Ellen Mulcahy, ‘Office Cleaners of the City’, Ibid., 16.2.1911, p.5.
138 Ibid., 15.8.1910, p.3.
with a man identified only as 'the late Mr Bromley'. An outraged Mrs Barry appealed long and bitterly to the PLC to rebuke Felstead, who refused to withdraw her comments. Legal action was threatened and eight months later, Barry even requested the dissolution of the WOC as a 'bogus body' on the grounds that under the PLC constitution the WOC was bound to obey the Executive's instructions. Barry argued that the dissolution of the WOC was warranted by Felstead's refusal to withdraw her 'slanderous [sic]' statements despite a request from the Executive to do so. The Executive made little effort to resolve the matter and took the view that Felstead had spoken as a member of the WOC, not of the Central Executive. It told Barry that it was not in a position to force Felstead to withdraw her statements and by March 1912 had ceased to reply to her protestations.

In February 1912, it appears that Felstead also clashed with Ellen Mulcahy because of Felstead's criticism of Mulcahy's leadership of the Parkville branch of the PLC. In the same month, Mulcahy had embarrassed Felstead before the Central Executive by questioning her actions concerning the payment of the Dressmakers' Union's affiliation dues to the Central Executive when Felstead was Secretary of that union. In effect, Felstead had paid the Union's affiliation without informing the members, so that the next Secretary had no knowledge of the money ever having been spent or that the union was in fact affiliated with the PLC. No further action was taken on the matter.

In September 1911 Ellen Mulcahy became the focus of controversy in the WOC, which accused her of retaining valuable WOC papers after her term as Secretary had expired. The dispute continued for six months, during which time Mulcahy insisted that she had no WOC documents. Yet Minnie

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139 PLC Minute Book, 18.8.1911.
140 Ibid., 9.9.1911.
141 Ibid., 9.3.1912.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid., and 23.3.1912.
144 Ibid., 24.2.1912.
145 Ibid., 4.4.1912.
146 Ibid., 9.9.1911.
abor Call, June 6th, 1912, p. 1.

MISS E. MULCARY,
Sec. Bookbinders’ Union (Female Branch),
and Laundry Workers’ Union.

MRS. M. FELSTEAD,
Sec. Women’s Organising Committee.
Felstead was adamant that Mulcahy was in possession of the papers, and was being deliberately uncooperative. The WOC appealed to the Executive to request Mulcahy to hand over the papers which the WOC claimed it needed to ascertain what affiliation funds had been paid.147 The Central Executive of the PLC, impatient with the dispute, backed Mulcahy, stating that it had no definite proof that she had any papers and refused to hear the matter again, and it appears that it was never resolved.148

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The internal ructions of the WOC did not, however, divert attention from the problem of male dominance over women within the Party, nor prevent some Labor women from coming to the realisation that they should push for access to positions of influence within the higher echelons of the Party. But these ambitions, did not, however, easily translate into practice. It had become an article of faith among the majority of WOC members that the interests of sexes were identical. It was believed that the internal disunity of the WOC in late 1911 would worsen if the WOC did not act to resolve those conflicts through united support for the Party. While the Central Executive had, in the past, been largely dismissive of the WOCs problems, the exigencies of the Federal election caused it to take more interest in Labor women's affairs. The WOC feared that its own disunity threatened to cause serious divisions between the sexes in the Party to the detriment of worker solidarity and would also weaken the WOCs utility to the Party. The demands of the election campaign and the need to minimise divisions within the WOC therefore strongly militated against the efforts of the dissident industrial activists in the WOC, who were themselves divided, to gain majority support for a more powerful and autonomous women's committee.

One indication of the general mood of the Labor party and the WOC towards agitation for greater political power for women was the response of the Vice President of the Victorian WOC, Mary Killury, to criticism concerning the role of the Victorian WOC from the New South Wales Labor women's activist and President of the N.S.W. Women Workers' Union, Kate Dwyer. In an interview

147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
in a Sydney newspaper in January 1912, Dwyer was critical of the Victorian WOC for having no constitution or status within the PLC. Dwyer’s views elicited a stern rebuke from Killury, who accused Dwyer of serving anti-labor forces by publicly voicing her criticisms of the Victorian WOC. She stated on behalf of her members that ‘the constitution of the PLC [was] quite sufficient’ as ‘it covers the whole ground on which we work’. As Vice President of the WOC, she said that ‘she would be exceedingly sorry to find any body of Labor women claiming an individual status’. Such an act would, she believed, ‘be a menace to the Party...and to the detriment of our labour movement’.149

Kate Dwyer’s views, however, sparked some debate in Labour Call over the issue of sexual division in the Party. In early February a woman from a country PLC branch, Mary Adelaide Wright, wrote that women were ‘very chary of being organised into Leagues’ alongside men. She said that in rural areas women were in favour of more localised women’s branches and felt there was a ‘personal feeling against local organisation’ among urban leaders. Wright also warned that ‘various women’s Tory leagues’ were gaining their success through the establishment of small, local women’s committees. Wright proposed that individual Women’s Labor Leagues should be set up which, if established on ‘a proper, sound, business-like basis’, could be regularly visited by central organisers.150

Wright’s views were immediately criticised as being politically naive. One correspondent known as ‘Cynicus’ claimed that Wright had ‘not realised the parlous state to which the PLC might ultimately be brought’ through the separation of the sexes into different branches. The only merit in her proposal was as a ‘temporary expedient’ to induce those women to join the Party who were unwilling to attend male-dominated proceedings, particularly in country regions. But owing to the apparent ‘expense and danger of duplication’ contained in such a measure, ‘Cynicus’ hoped, like Killury, that

149  Labor Call, 15.2.1912, p.5.

150  Ibid., 8.2.1912, p.8.
the day will never arrive when level headed men and women, possessing a fair knowledge of
the methods and objective of the Labor party, who are not seeking preferment, but desire to
assist in the advancement of human welfare, will ever want to have separate branches for the
sexes.\textsuperscript{151}

As Vice-President of the WOC, Killury could not have been unaware that independent status was
precisely the direction in which certain members of the WOC were headed. The lack of cohesion
within the WOC, however, determined that the pursuit of political representation and feminist goals
would have to come about through the isolated and individual actions of Labor women, and not as the
result of a unified campaign led by the WOC. The first of these such actions occurred in February
1912 when the Labor Party preselection for the Senate was held. Mrs Wilkinson, WOC member and
Secretary of the Women Workers' Union, became the first woman to seek political office within the
Labor Party when she nominated herself as one of 26 candidates for the three Senate vacancies.\textsuperscript{152}
The significance of Wilkinson's candidacy was not, however, recognised by the WOC. On the
contrary, it appears that Wilkinson's nomination represented a personal bid for power which she
undertook without prior consultation with her WOC colleagues.

Not only did the WOC fail to endorse her candidacy, but according to Wilkinson, it actively opposed
her preselection. At a meeting of the Central Executive just prior to the ballot count, Wilkinson made
a vague accusation that her efforts had been sabotaged by a meeting of women at Trades Hall who had
'tried to influence the voting against her'.\textsuperscript{153} She did not confine her allegations of opposition purely
to women. Wilkinson appeared convinced that her nomination had not been and would not be treated
fairly by the Party. She was the only candidate to request the appointment of a scrutineer at the ballot
count and also demanded a summary of the voting by all PLC branches and trade unions. The Central
Executive rejected her latter request and refused to consider her misgivings without specific
evidence.\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 27.2.1912, p.7.
\textsuperscript{152} PLC Minute Book, 12.2.1912.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 4.5.1912.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
Not long after Wilkinson’s failed bid for pre-selection came a series of attacks by the North Melbourne branch of the PLC on the Parkville branch led by Ellen Mulcahy. Founded in June 1911, the Parkville Political Labor League was the first branch of the Labor Party to be established and administered by a woman.155 There is, however, no record of the early activities of the Parkville branch until it became the centre of controversy in 1912 following vehement opposition to its continued existence among certain sections of the Party.

The opposition of the Parkville branch appears to have had little to do with political ideology. It was apparent that the leaders of the other branches in the Melbourne set perceived the Parkville branch as a pre-selection rival, because there had previously been only three branches in the electorate (North Melbourne, Melbourne and East Melbourne). The formation of the fourth branch in the electorate elicited an entirely personal attack on Mulcahy’s motives for establishing it and her leadership of it. It was not, however, only her competitors in the Melbourne electorate who challenged the validity of the Parkville branch. Both the Secretary of the WOC, Minnie Felstead, and the President, Mrs Cohen, backed the opposition to Mulcahy of the North Melbourne branch. When Mulcahy first applied for affiliation with the PLC in June 1911 the North Melbourne branch, supported by Felstead and Cohen, made the first of several demands for an inquiry to establish whether the branch was bona fide.156 On that occasion the Executive rebuffed Mulcahy’s critics, refused any inquiry and granted affiliation.157 Any dispute over the internal balance of power between the branches within the electorate does not, however, explain the opposition of Felstead and Cohen, as Mulcahy’s colleagues and feminist activists, to her actions in founding the branch. One likely explanation is that such opposition reflected some degree of resentment to Mulcahy’s increasing prominence within the labour movement. By 1912, she

155 *Ibid.*, 3.6.1911. Ellen Mulcahy was not the only female Secretary of a local Labor Party branch. In 1912 at least six other women also were PLC branch Secretaries - Castlemaine, Mitta Mitta, Healesville, Cheltenham, Yarraville and Beechworth, *Labor Call*, 20.9.1912, p.10.


had achieved much success in the establishment of women’s unions. She had been singularly responsible for founding four of the largest women’s unions in Melbourne - the Women Bookbinders’ Union, the Laundresses’ Union, the Cigarette Workers’ Union and the Office Cleaners’ Union. It appears that in establishing the Parkville branch, Mulcahy may have wished to extend the scope of her activity and provide another avenue for her to utilise her considerable organisational talents. It is indeed plausible that she possessed personal, political motives in doing so. She may have feared that her influence in the political sphere compared with the industrial sphere would decline after her term as WOC Secretary expired in 1911 - around the same time that she formed the Parkville branch. After the animosity between herself and Minnie Felstead over the missing WOC papers, she had no doubt alienated much support within the WOC.

In a letter to the Central Executive in February 1912, the Secretary of the North Melbourne PLC, D.G. Carter, clarified the opposition to Mulcahy, chargeing that her branch was ‘unnecessary and a menace to the movement at times of election’. Reflecting the belief that Mulcahy had established the branch for her own advancement, her critics continued to assert that the membership of the Parkville branch was comprised entirely of bogus names and addresses. Felstead and Cohen again supported Carter’s views and called for a sub-committee to enquire into the matter further. Mulcahy, however, produced valid membership tickets, and minute books which proved to the satisfaction of the Central Executive that it was a legitimate branch.

Although Mulcahy foiled her critics in February, the matter did not rest there. It was again raised by Carter at the PLC Annual Conference in April 1912. Before all the assembled delegates to the Conference, Mulcahy bitterly protested that she had already twice proven the validity of her branch. Her critics tenaciously pursued the matter by questioning the figures she had quoted concerning the size of the branch and the election of its officers. On a motion of the North Melbourne branch, a committee of enquiry was finally established to investigate the internal affairs of the branch.

158 Ibid.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid., 5.4.1912.
The following day the committee reported its findings to the Conference where it gave a conditional endorsement to Mulcahy. It was critical of her actions in establishing the branch as 'ill-considered' but found nothing unconstitutional in her doing so. While the committee believed that neighbouring branches should, out of courtesy, consult with one another, it said there was no basis on which to compel such action.\textsuperscript{161} In essence, the committee found that the North Melbourne branch's complaints were the result of poor communication between the secretaries of both branches, which had led to the confusion and ill-feeling.\textsuperscript{162} While the branch was reported as having been constitutionally formed, the committee did, however, find that it had 'not worked harmoniously with other branches in the electorate and had failed to justify its position in the last election campaign'.\textsuperscript{163}

The conflicts which characterised WOC affairs in 1911 and 1912 were much more than mere personality clashes: they were indicative of the changed nature of the WOC. By late 1912 the small women's committee formed by the PLC in 1903 had matured into a body of politically skilled and articulate women with a wide organisational network throughout Victoria. Between 1909 and 1912 there had been an enormous spurt of activity by the WOC in the industrial organisation of women which had, however, become increasingly separated from the political focus of the WOC. But despite the WOCs expansion, its original charter remained the same.

From an organisational perspective, the limited resources and restricted authority of the WOC no doubt exhausted its energies and strained relations between its members. As this chapter has shown, only a small number of WOC members had individually taken on a heavy burden of responsibility in the formation of women's unions. In their never-ending work of attending union, THC and PLC meetings, appearing at Wages Board hearings and carrying out administrative tasks, these women became immersed in the concerns of the particular unions they represented. As a result, their activities were

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 6.4.1912.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
invariably not well co-ordinated. Their achievements more often reflected the personal talents of particular individuals than the collective successes of Labor women.

The early division which emerged in the period covered by this chapter, between those women committed to the precedence of political loyalty and class solidarity on the one hand, and the minority of women involved in improving the industrial and economic position of women on the other hand was to become the WOC’s most enduring problem. The WOC remained a body united on class lines but divided by its conflicts over priorities and strategies - namely that of sexual division within the labour movement. The resolution of such tensions could, of necessity, only come about through a major revision of the basic structure, purpose and status of the WOC.

By 1912, women union leaders had successfully consolidated their position within the Party through their tireless campaign to organise women in several key industries. They now sought credit for their efforts within the movement and expected to see women workers’ demands brought to prominence in the Party platform. Equal pay, greater autonomy and access to political power for women were all demands which necessitated a major concession of power to women by the male power-brokers within the movement, who still viewed the WOC as a subservient, auxiliary body. A majority of WOC members were suspicious of their colleagues’ agitations, and desired that the WOC should remain safely within the bounds of traditional women’s issues. In the following year, the emerging equal pay controversy would bring Labor women’s divided loyalties to a head.
CHAPTER THREE:

FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT
TO FIGHT FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS 1912-1914

Between 1912 and 1918 Labor women’s campaign for the recognition of women’s political and economic rights was fought more within the ranks of their own Party than it was in the public arena. At the same time that the post-suffrage non-party feminists found that the pursuit of women’s equality increasingly demanded a political response, Labor women were finding that their subservient role in a male-dominated Party constantly hampered their pursuit of feminist goals. Such a realisation produced the first serious challenge to the basic premise upon which Labor women had pledged their support for the Party, that is, that the interests of both sexes were united in the common cause of Labor.

By questioning the unity of gender interest, Labor women at the same time transgressed the basis on which they had been admitted into the Party in 1903 as a separate women’s committee. The intention of the PLC was that the WOC would represent ‘women’s issues’, such as domestic, family and child welfare concerns in a way which would preserve and uplift the existing social and sexual order for the benefit of both working-class men and women. After nearly a decade of activism, however, certain Labor women began to take up wider issues concerning women’s lack of power, autonomy and representation in the social, political and economic order of society. Such controversial issues led, uncomfortably, into an awareness that women’s equality could not be achieved without disturbing some fundamental principles of sexual division in both theory and practice. The experiences of women union leaders, in particular, had provided much evidence of the male self-interest which permeated a male-dominated Party. In essence they found that they could not pursue women’s equality in the public arena as long as they lacked equality within their own party.

Towards the end of 1912, the exigencies of the coming Federal election provided Labor women with a purpose on which they could focus their divided energies. Through their shared commitment to Labor ideals, these women temporarily put aside their differences to concentrate on the Labor Party’s
The following delegates were entitled to the Convention:

Typographical Society—Mrs. O’DOWD, Mrs. MURRAY.

Hawkers’ and Dealers’ Union—Mrs. HEAGNEY, Mrs. HEAGNEY.

Agricultural Implement Makers’ Union—Mrs. E. F. RUSSELL, Mrs. MIDDLETON.

Pastrycook’s and Biscuit-makers’ Union—Mrs. DAVIES, Mrs. J. FEELY.

Sawmillers’ Union—Miss L. PARKER, Miss I. M’LAREN.

Marble and Stone Workers’ Union—Mrs. KILLURY, Mrs. DOREY.

Match Workers’ Union—Mrs. A. DAVIDSON, Miss N. M’CALLUM.

Wool and Grain Stores’ Union—Mrs. J. MCDONALD.

Clerk’s Union—Miss G. MANTACH.

Clothing Trades’ Union—Mrs. ROBERTSON, Miss A. MANTACH.

Hotel and Caterers’ Union—Mrs. HUMBY, Miss KEOGH.

Tanners’ Union—Mrs. JOHN.

Footscray Branch—Mrs. MATHESON.

Swan Hill Branch—Mrs. WHITHAM.

Castlemaine Branch—Mrs. LILLEY.

Miss LEARY.

Elda Branch—Mrs. D’PREE, Mrs. CORLESS.

Collingwood Branch—Mrs. PRITCHARD.

Tallangatta Branch—Mrs. MULHOLAND.

Prahran Branch—Mrs. SAVAGE.

Rutherglen Branch—Mrs. G. EVANS.

St. Kilda Branch—Mrs. EVANS, Mrs. LEWIS.

Yeaville Branch—Mrs. NEWTON.

George’s Branch—Mrs. CHRISTOPHER.

Mr. STARR.

Escot Branch—Mrs. WHEELER, Mrs. HART.

Richmond Branch—Mrs. Mc MILLAN.

Miss HOBAN.
campaign. The Labor Women’s Convention held in October 1912 provided a useful vehicle for the WOC to promote a more unified ideology than it had in the preceding twelve months. In planning its various organisational and educational activities, much discussion at the Convention was spent preaching solidarity. The President of the Convention, Annie Whitham, echoed the view she had expressed when she held that same position at the 1910 Labor Women’s Convention. Whitham impressed upon the meetings that the democratic nature of the Party heightened its appeal to women especially. She urged that ‘the women of Australia have a great deal to thank the Labor party for. It had, unflinchingly, fought for…the political recognition of women’.\textsuperscript{1} In return, Whitham said women should express their gratitude by acting as ‘Labor missionaries, and if needs be, make sacrifices in order to help the cause of Labor’.\textsuperscript{2}

The election campaign was not, however, the only reason why the WOC sought greater unity of purpose. The growing activism of conservative women’s groups, particularly the Australian Women’s National League, demanded that the WOC improve its image, popularity and relevance among women voters. The need to broaden its appeal led Labor women into a stronger emphasis on issues of women’s public equality and status, an area hitherto dominated by middle-class women’s groups.

The conference debated the need for a wide range of reforms aimed at the democratisation of laws which they saw as restricting women’s equality as citizens. They expressed demands for the reform of marriage and divorce laws, increased widows pensions, the appointment of women to juries, the Children’s Court Bench, the State Charities Board, and the employment of female school and factory inspectors.\textsuperscript{3} The intent of these proposals were later encapsulated in two motions. The first, moved by Sara Lewis, proposed that ‘women be granted the same rights as men in election [and] appointment to all public positions’.\textsuperscript{4} Another proposal, moved by Mesdames Ryan and Reed, demanded that ‘women be appointed on all committees that manage institutions where the welfare of women and

\begin{itemize}
  \item[1] Labor Call, 24.10.1912, p.1.
  \item[2] Ibid.
  \item[3] Ibid., p.9.
  \item[4] Ibid., p.1.
\end{itemize}
children are at stake'. The only contentious motion was one which went further to demand the election of women to state parliament. One critic of the motion feared that 'the time was not yet ripe' because 'women were not sufficiently advanced in politics to take such a step'. The motion was, however, carried, as the majority believed that 'women were better adapted to discuss some questions than men' and that their presence 'would raise the tone of the debate'.

The many and varied welfare proposals put forward at the conference indicated that Labor women were also participants in the wider health reform movement of the early twentieth century. Interest in public health issues intensified at that time in response to the expansion of the cities, population growth and the pressures of urban industrial living. The leaders of the movement have been described as the 'upper middle-class charity network' comprised of bourgeois women's charity groups acting in alliance with the new breed of professional experts in fields such as medicine, education, technology and urban planning. The main focus of these 'health reformers' was the working-class family household and, in particular, women's role within it. The encouragement of new, improved domestic skills in the individual 'scientific' management of households was identified as the basis from which many improvements in the quality of living should arise, such as the provision of clear water, pure foods and milk, efficient waste disposal and the control of infectious disease.

The response of the WOC, as a large working-class women's group, was similar in many respects, to that of the middle-class reformers. Among other proposals, delegates called for the licensing of manufacturers of foodstuffs, especially milk, to ensure compliance with the Pure Foods Act, the

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5 Ibid., p.9.
6 Ibid., p.1.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p.47.
provision of more public toilets for women, the prevention of entry of diseased immigrants, and the establishment of government-run cottage homes for the elderly.\textsuperscript{11}

The unity of concern over women's responsibilities in the home and family among the various groups involved in social reform did not, of course, transcend political and class divisions. The concerns of Labor women for improved living standards were intimately linked with their class consciousness. They sought to highlight the extent to which their proposals differed from those of middle-class women's benevolent societies, which they accused of having no knowledge or experience of deprivation. The dominance of middle-class women in the management of charitable institutions was, in fact, a major target of the WOC's welfare platform.

The attitude of various charity groups to the recent introduction of the Maternity Allowance Bill by the Fisher government demonstrated to Labor women the class bias in the management of public welfare. The WOC condemned the remarks of the Ladies Charities and Benevolent Societies describing the maternity allowance as 'unwomanly' and 'uncharitable'.\textsuperscript{12} It also attacked the Australian Women's National League (AWNLI) for its criticism of the Bill. They were viewed as a 'select body who have no notion of the privations many women endure at that trying time' and chose to cast 'many slurs...on the womanhood of Australia' by claiming it would cause an increase in the number of unmarried mothers.\textsuperscript{13} The WOC retaliated by stating that 'no decent-minded woman would say or think that another woman would...risk losing her life for the sake of getting five pounds'.\textsuperscript{14} According to the WOC, such women were 'totally unfitted to be the custodians of public money given for the relief of distress' as whenever they saw 'a little sunshine going into the homes of their less fortunate sisters they were the first to stop an allowance being given'.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Labor Call}, 24.10.1912, pp. 1,9.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}
The WOC's criticism of the rather more conservative political sympathies of women's welfare societies did not, however, mean that they believed the welfare arena should not be the subject of political influence. The motions which the Convention passed demanding that women be appointed to all welfare committees did not mean any women; they intended that Labor women should be installed in such positions. In response to the AWNL's charge that the Maternity Allowance Bill was an 'election dodge' and 'class legislation', the WOC replied that all legislation was class-oriented. With the Labor party in office, they did not see 'why should not the workers even things up a little'.

Labor women's adoption of issues which had formerly been the domain of middle-class women's groups, such as access to public office and the administration of welfare was not, therefore, prompted by purely humanitarian motives. It clearly represented a political response to the increasing popularity of their conservative counterparts, most particularly, the AWNL. The Victorian Labor Party was still much less successful electorally than the conservative Parties at both the 1908 and 1911 state elections, and the AWNL had also contributed much to the success of the Liberals at the 1911 poll.

Late in 1911 AWNL secretary/organiser, Eleanor Cameron, stated that the League had formed 10 new branches in one week. For the WOC, the most worrying aspect of the League's activities was its alleged success in attracting the support of working-class women. Cameron claimed that in contrast to the belief that the League 'had nothing to offer the wife and daughter of the artisan or the woman worker herself', it had in fact established strong branches in many working-class suburbs which had previously been 'Labor walkovers'. The AWNL claimed much credit for the conservative triumph over Labor in the 1911 state election and had undertaken a strong anti-Labor offensive in the 1912 federal election campaign. The *Argus* later acclaimed the League as a 'great moderating influence'.

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17b *Argus*, 20.11.1911, p.7.
18 *Ibid*.
19 *Ibid*.
whose growing popularity had caused much alarm among the Labor ranks.\textsuperscript{20}

The growing influence of the AWNL added a sense of urgency to the WOC's efforts to broaden its appeal to a much wider female audience. Despite the fact that both Labor and conservative women shared an interest in improving women's access to public positions and public status in general, the WOC sought no common ground in this area with the AWNL at this time. Members of the League were their political enemies whose appeal to women had been achieved by their misrepresentation of the aims of the Labor Party and the League's own aims.

The means by which Labor women pursued their attack on the AWNL was by way of a campaign of personal abuse rather than on the basis of its politics. The intention, it seems, was to challenge the League's ability to represent women by tarnishing the femininity and morality of its members. In doing so, the WOC demonstrated equal skill with male politicians in directing vitriol and personal abuse against their political opponents. One senior AWNL figure, Mrs Berry, was described as 'a battler in Cupid's wars, who, from many encounters, had carried away the scars of a veteran'.\textsuperscript{21} Berry was also 'raucous and rasperish - the kind of woman a man would give a wide berth to'.\textsuperscript{22} The League's members collectively were labelled the 'shrieking sisterhood', a 'coterie of painted political Jezebels' and 'narrow-minded haridans'.\textsuperscript{23} Labor women branded the League's politics as 'stupid claptrap' and 'frothy political nonsense' which only appealed to 'a stodgy class of money-worshippers' and a 'handful of...lazy and unproductive parasites'.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite their efforts to trivialise the AWNL, the WOC was not, however, prepared to underestimate the political impact of the AWNL's activities. Annie Whitham stressed to the 1912 WOC conference that they must not allow the League to capture the women's vote by misrepresenting the Labor Party.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, 3.9.1912, p.12.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Labor Call}, 24.10.1912, p.3.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, 12.9.1912, p.5.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}
'Show any mother how her children could be advantaged by supporting the Labor Party', she urged 'and it was not long before the mother would be with the Labor Party'. The vehemence of their critique of the AWNL was also perhaps a means by which the WOC could demonstrate to the male party bosses the strength of their loyalty to Labor and therefore distance themselves from any political likeness to the ideals of conservative women’s groups.

Although the WOC at this time expressed strong concerns for women’s equality in the public sphere, in particular through its support for women’s access to appointment and election to public office, this did not include any overtly radical feminist demand for increased power or autonomy within the Party. Their aspirations to positions of influence were based on the premise that they would discharge such authority in a strictly traditional, feminine manner within the bounds of accepted women’s issues. The senior members of the PLC in attendance at the 1912 Conference indicated that the support they had given the WOC was conditional upon women not impinging upon ‘men’s’ sphere of authority. Labor Parliamentarian, R.H. Solly, for example, claimed that the work of the WOC ‘could greatly help the position of other women in the discussion of subjects in which women were closely identified...and still assist further in humanitarian work for the people’.

Labor women’s interest in health and welfare issues at the Convention was also reflected in the WOC’s industrial strategies. The five motions concerned with women’s wages and conditions were all oriented towards the introduction of legislation protective of female workers’ health, and also expressed an underlying concern for their duty as future mothers. The Convention unanimously reaffirmed a motion which had been passed at the PLC annual conference that ‘six hours per day be deemed a working day for all female labour’. The other proposals dealt with the regulation of the speed of power machines operated by women, improved sanitation and ventilation in factories, the provision of lifts in factories over two storeys and the abolition, as far as possible, of all outdoor and basement work.

26 Ibid., p.5.
27 Ibid., p.10.
28 Ibid.
The WOC's neglect of industrial issues was perhaps due to the fact that Labor women had won wide support for their industrial policies at the recent October PLC convention. There, the three women delegates, Lewis, Felstead and Wilkinson, spoke in support of a four-part proposal:

(a) that six hours per day be deemed a working day for all female labour;
(b) that properly ventilated and sanitary accommodation be provided for same;
(c) the total abolition of underground and basement working places;
(d) no underground sleeping places for females, and further, the abolition of all outdoor work in connection with factories, except in necessitous cases.29

The WOC's industrial policies represented a reasoned and progressive response to the exposure of Labor women of the persistence of harsh and abusive conditions in areas such as factories, shops and restaurants. However, despite the fact that the conditions described by female union leaders would not have been conducive to the health of workers of either sex, and that it was unlikely that male factory workers' conditions were ideal, interest in occupational health and safety issues was almost exclusively confined to female workers. Male labour leaders rarely expressed concern for such issues. This difference in approach points to the other dimension of Labor women's focus on women's industrial welfare which critically set women apart from men in the workplace: the underlying belief (of both men and women of the labour movement) that women were the 'weaker sex'. By portraying women as the physical inferiors of men, Labor women promoted the traditional 'separate spheres' ideology of sexual division which immediately identified their employment as being of a different character to male employment.

At the PLC Convention, Wilkinson echoed Lewis when she explained to the predominantly male audience that 'the constitutions of girls were being seriously impaired' due to the lack of sunlight and ventilation in workshops.30 A.W. Wallace of the Clothing Trades' Union supported her findings, and

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
he added that ‘the vibration of machines was undermining the vigour of young women in factories’. In a similar vein at the WOC Convention, Sara Lewis had stated that ‘six hours was a fair working day for women [because] toiling long hours in factories was tending to spread anaemia, which was fast becoming a scourge’.

While Labor women genuinely desired to alleviate the hardships suffered by female workers, their repeated reference to the danger of women’s health was, in the short term, also a politically astute means of winning special provisions for the protection of women. They won not only the wide support of the labour movement, but also much sympathy from the press and the public. In the long term, however, the use of the separate spheres ideology as a means of advancing women’s economic equality was counter-productive. By having as the basis of their claims the belief that women were biologically unsuited to some paid work, Labor women maintained perceptions of women’s industrial plight as a highly emotive, social concern. This tended to obscure women’s economic equality as a serious industrial issue. Equally, such ideology did not provide women with any basis on which to challenge the prior employment rights of men over women. The Argus, for example, was hostile to the Labor Party and opposed equal pay for women, yet advocated views very similar to the WOC on women’s health in the workplace:

Girls nowadays seek employment as well as boys, and in itself this employment is not a social evil, provided always that it does not injure woman’s capacity for her first and greatest contribution to the progress of the race. Protective or prohibitive legislation should defend the ‘industrial girl’ from being unfitted for motherhood and...family life[]

From a late twentieth century perspective, the failure of first-wave feminists to challenge the existing sexual order may be viewed as a major tactical error. But the severe health risks faced by female workers demanded immediate attention. In the context of the period, it is also unreasonable to expect that they could or would have abandoned deeply embedded sexual social mores which promoted

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., p.1.
33 Argus, 28.7.1911. p.6.
marriage and the family as women's first and foremost responsibility. In this formative period of industrial relations, when many significant industrial decisions were being debated, the nascent women's unions were hardly equipped to resolve conflicts over the ideology of sex roles which had only barely become apparent. In a practical sense, too, it was not possible for Labor women to have taken a different course. The industrial organisation of women was still in its infancy - most of the women's unions had only recently been formed. Whereas the WOC's interests in the political sphere had progressed beyond its early propaganda role, in the industrial arena their energies were still channelled primarily into organisational strategies. As long as women were still without the most basic protection afforded by unions, they could not logically devote their attention to more complex economic and ideological issues.

With the benefit of hindsight, historians have now shown how protective legislation and indeed equal pay formed the basis of discriminatory employment practices by employers and the labour movement throughout the twentieth century. Of the industrial policies introduced between 1900 and 1918 historians Edna Ryan and Anne Conlon have stated that

> discrimination against women took two forms with the one motive: to keep women away from men's work. They were singled out for protection as a disincentive for employers to take them, or they were to be paid the men's rate in the belief that no employer...would [pay] a woman the same as a man.34

Labor women showed little awareness of the consequences of such measures, but they were not the passive or unwitting recipients of discriminatory policies designed by men. The introduction of policies which 'singled out' women in fact emanated as much from Labor women as from Labor men. The majority of WOC members had always maintained the belief that there was no serious divergence of interest between the sexes as represented by the Labor Party and, fearful of the practical implications of sexual division in the Party, were quick to deny the self-interest of their male colleagues. In the area of equal pay Labor women at this stage also displayed similar unawareness, if not naivete, of the

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extent to which sections of the union movement regarded equal pay as a device for the protection of male workers’ wages and jobs, having little or no concern for equal pay as a women’s rights issue.

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The introduction of equal pay in various federal and state awards had proceeded with little uniformity towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Indeed, the union movement appeared to have no comprehensive policy for or against it. But in the years between 1911 and 1913 three important equal-pay cases came before the industrial tribunals of the federal and state wage-fixing systems, and prompted a variety of responses from women, unions and employers.

In 1991 the Boot Trade Employees’ Federation appealed to Justice Heydon in the New South Wales Industrial Court for the introduction of equal pay in that trade.35 The appeal was against a recent decision of the New South Wales Wages Board which allowed women to operate the new Fortuna machine on a wage of 21 shillings compared with 2 pounds 14 shillings for men. Justice Heydon refused the Federation’s appeal on the basis that equal pay should not be used as a means by which women would be prevented from gaining employment because they were to be paid the same rate as men.36

In contrast to the Boot Trade award, Justice Higgins brought down a landmark decision in the Mildura Fruitpickers’ Case before the Commonwealth Arbitration Court in 1912 when he awarded equal pay for women. Whereas Heydon had sought to protect women from competition with men by refusing equal pay, Higgins awarded it in response to the Rural Workers’ Union claim for the reverse reason: to protect men’s jobs from displacement by women.37 In recognising that fruitpicking was traditionally a male job, he highlighted the need to uphold existing divisions between male and female work as the basis of wage determination for the sexes. Higgins found that in the fruitpicking industry ‘men and

35 Argus, 16.2.1911, p.9.
36 Ibid., 28.7.1911, p.6.
37 Ryan and Conlon, Gentle Invaders, pp. 98-100.
women [were] fairly in competition' and so each should be paid the same wage. If women were not in competition with men, however, then there would be no reason for equal pay: wage awards would in that case continue to be determined according to his 1907 Harvester living wage decision, which conferred to men a higher wage on the basis of their breadwinner status, and to women, a lower wage sufficient to keep a single woman in reasonable comfort.38

The third crucial equal pay case was the Commercial Clerks' Case, which began with the introduction of equal pay in the clerical field by the Commercial Clerks' Wages Board in August 1912, and ended with the subsequent reversal of the Board's decision by Justice Cussen in the Industrial Court in February 1912. The Commercial Clerks' Case revealed that the distinction between male and female work was not always easy to clarify in jobs which had undergone considerable sexual transformation over the years. It also addressed another highly problematic area - that of whether women did in fact perform the same work as men when employed in identical jobs.

With the Commercial Clerks equal pay ruling having been brought down only two months prior to the 1912 Labor Women's Convention, it is surprising that the WOC did not express much enthusiasm or interest in the issue. Equal pay, in fact, only briefly entered the discussion twice. In the first instance, the meeting expressed its support for a campaign led by the Lady Teachers' Association for equal pay.39 The convention believed that 'as women already had equality with men politically, why should not the principle apply industrially?'. Miss Mantach stated that the Clerks' Wages Board had admitted the principle and that without equal pay 'women should always be undercutting and be underpaid'. Sara Lewis moved a motion that 'where women are engaged in the same work as men they should receive the same wage'. The meeting then affirmed its support for Higgins' ruling in the Mildura Fruit Pickers' Case.40

38 Ibid., p.100.
40 Ibid.
Perhaps the WOC felt that the momentum of equal pay had begun with the Fruitpickers' decision and the Wages Board ruling in the Commercial Clerks' Case, which was sufficient reassurance that the equal pay principle would soon spread to other industries as a matter of course. It appears, however, that the Commercial Clerks' Wages Board's decision came as an unexpected blow to employers, who quickly mounted a fierce campaign to have it rescinded. In the following months this campaign confronted Labor women with the issue of sexual division and, as a result, the unity the WOC professed to have achieved both with the PLC and internally at the 1912 Convention was short-lived. The application of equal pay was a critical test of relations between the women and men of the Labor Party and again created divisions inside the WOC, as the ensuing debates within the labour movement explored complex issues of economics, biological determinism and women's rights.

The complexity and contradictions surrounding the equal pay issue are demonstrated in Ellen Mulcahy's experiences as a women's organiser in the Federated Clerks' Union (FCU) campaign. The FCU was the union which had sought equal pay before the Commercial Clerks' Wages Board, and the introduction of equal pay in the clerical field represented a major victory for the Victorian branch of the Federated Clerks' Union as the culmination of a twelve month campaign.

Ellen Mulcahy had been appointed to organise women clerks and typists by the Victorian branch of the Federated Clerks' Union (FCU) in July 1911. 41 As early as 1903, when the short-lived Women Typists' Association was formed, clerical work was acclaimed as one of the worst kinds of female employment in both wages and conditions. 42 A decade later, conditions for female office workers were still seen to lag behind conditions in factories where women workers had benefited from the advances of factory legislation. The office girl, however, still toiled in stultifying conditions breathing 'foul air, with no lavatory, irreligious light detrimental to eyesight and nerves'. 43


42 Toocsin, 14.5.1903, p.8, 11.6.1903, p.8.

Mulcahy's task in organising female clerks was, from the outset, particularly difficult. Whereas she had previously been involved either in pioneering the establishment of women's unions where none had previously existed, or in establishing quite distinct autonomous women's sections of larger male unions, in the case of the FCU, she was required to work closely with its leadership and to accommodate the views of its male members and leaders.

Upon appointment, Mulcahy was warmly welcomed by the FCU, which predicted that beneficial results would flow from her work.\textsuperscript{44} Ten months later, it was reported that membership of the women's section was growing rapidly.\textsuperscript{45} However, it was not long before it became apparent to Mulcahy that the union's motives in seeking to bring women into its ambit for the first time and securing equal pay differed from her own objectives. Although the FCU often referred to the necessity to alleviate conditions for female workers, its prime object was to retard the growing displacement of men by women in the industry. In April 1912 the union journal reported seven examples of firms in which women had replaced men and again in August blamed women's cheaper labour for causing the loss of male jobs\textsuperscript{46}. The FCU was not, however, alone in the nature of its 'concern' for the wages paid to women. Soon after the Wages Board's decision \textit{Labor Call} congratulated the FCU, stating that the union's success was a gain in principle for all workers.

Clerical work in all branches was at one time...men's work. But for the sake of cheapness females were introduced. They have been getting the monopoly of employment...and have at the same time been dragging down the wages of men. [Without equal pay] men would be still further sacrificed for girls.\textsuperscript{47}

One can only wonder at Mulcahy's predicament as a women's rights activist within a union which professed its support for the rights of its male members to work at the expense of women. Mulcahy had, nonetheless, already gained some experience of the mercenary ends of male-dominated unions and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Ibid.}, Vol. 1, 25.7.1911.
  \item \textit{Ibid.}, Vol. 2, No. 11, 31.5.1912, p.3.
  \item \textit{Ibid.}, Vol. 10, No. 11, 30.4.1912.
  \item \textit{Labor Call}, 28.11.1912, p.5.
\end{itemize}
apparently continued undaunted in the FCU, working at cross purposes with the union’s leadership. At a meeting of the women’s section of the union in May she urged that

There remains much to be done to ensure the realisation by women clerks and typists that their welfare lies in their own hands...By combining collectively for individual gain[...]. The lack of co-operation of "men’s unions" and of men...has afforded a ready means for [women’s] exploitation in industry.48

The conflict between the aims of Mulcahy and those of the FCU leadership was not the only problem with which she had to contend. Prior to the Commercial Clerks’ Wages Board decision, another ‘union’ of female clerks and typists was formed around mid 1912 with strong backing from employers and the proprietor of the Commercial Business College, F.S. Beckwith. Under the leadership of the conservative ex-AWNL official, Eleanor Cameron, the Lady Shorthand Writers and Typists Association (LSTA) formed as a lobby group in opposition to the women’s section of the FCU by claiming to represent the true voice of women. The LSTA charged that Mulcahy had ‘wilfully misrepresented’ the interests of women and that the FCU had only a small minority of women clerks in its ranks.49

The LSTA bitterly opposed equal pay for women in the belief that women’s work in the clerical field was qualitatively and quantitatively inferior to that of men. Cameron stated that while she supported equal pay in some cases, ‘typewriting is purely a women’s branch of the work and there is no method of comparison’.50 Employers complained that the Commercial Clerks’ Wages Board wronged themselves because ‘men [were] capable of giving one-third better return’ than women.51

Both the LSTA and employers predicted that equal pay would herald the large-scale dismissal of female clerks and typists who could not possibly compete with male labour. Cameron claimed that women

49 *Herald*, 1.8.1912. Eleanor Cameron had been an organiser with the AWNL until December 1912, when she resigned after a dispute with its leaders. *Labor Call*, 12.12.1912, p.4.
50 *Herald*, 1.8.1912.
resented the award, because women at 21 years of age would be 'compelled' to demand the unreasonable wage of 45 shillings a week.\textsuperscript{52} The LSTA proposed that wages should be determined on experience and merit only, rather than on increments according to age. The FCU's log had claimed a minimum rate of 48 shillings for a 48-hour week for most classes of clerical work with regular increments according to age.\textsuperscript{53} Cameron proposed a starting rate of one pound with an increase each year of 5 shillings to a maximum wage of 35 shillings for a 41-hour week.\textsuperscript{54} Wages that were paid according to criteria such as experience and merit would not, according to opponents of equal pay, prejudice women's employment opportunities by forcing them to compete with men, as in the FCU claim. But, as the LSTA claimed, those women who were actually worth the male rate could legitimately claim it and the rest could continue on in secure employment paid commensurate with their abilities.\textsuperscript{55}

However genuine Cameron's belief that equal pay was detrimental to women's interest may have been, her views certainly coincided with the economic motives of the employer groups and business colleges from which she received her backing.\textsuperscript{56} In spreading fears that equal pay would result in many sackings among women clerks the LSTA adopted a strategy which was effective in portraying the FCU's campaign as an attempt to profit from the misfortune of unemployed young women. The FCU, however, was quick to counter such criticism with accusations of the hypocrisy of employers, who had profited from women's cheaper labour for years, yet now professed concern for the economic interests of women. The union charged that employers had threatened girls with dismissal if they refused to sign a petition opposing equal pay organised by the LSTA, and that many had done so in ignorance of

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 19.12.1912.


\textsuperscript{54} Age, 13.11.1912; Argus, 19.12.1912.

\textsuperscript{55} Herald, 11, 17.12.1912.

\textsuperscript{56} Chambers claimed that the LSTA had only 32 members and that it was funded by the Victorian Chamber of Manufacturers, the Victorian Employers' Federation, and the Victorian Chamber of Commerce. He also stated that both Eleanor Cameron and her colleague Beatrice Hall were paid wages far in excess of those claimed by the FCU. Argus, 28.1.1913, 3.2.1913. Cameron and Hall dispute Chambers' claims in the Argus, 4.2.1913.
its content. However, the Secretary of the Victorian branch of the FCU, E. Chambers, also claimed that Beckwith had orchestrated the letter-writing campaign to the press ostensibly by women clerks and typists. The business colleges' opposition to equal pay, the union explained, originated in the fact that 'their chief traffic is undeniably the child pupil' and that as a result of increased wages 'the child employee will vanish with her sister, the "gaining experience" parasite'.

The LSTA was, nevertheless, successful in attracting support for its views. Between the time of the Commercial Clerks' Wages Board decision in August 1912 and its date of operation on 3rd January 1913, a huge controversy in the press arose concerning the relative merits and, more particularly, the demerits of women's labour in comparison to men which seemed to condemn women to unemployment in the event of equal wage rates. When the award came into operation in early January, a plethora of conflicting reports surrounded opinion as to its effect on women's jobs. The Herald and the Argus, which had both earlier warned of widespread sackings, reported that much reorganisation of work would occur in industry so that only a few retrenchments would be necessary. One large firm was reported to have stated that its female typists were too experienced to dismiss and that it could not find competent men to do typing and shorthand for the award rate. There was also much confusion over the application of the award and Chambers of the FCU warned that it was open to abuse by employers reclassifying jobs. He did concede that some women might be dismissed but argued that their loss would be offset in the long term by the increased efficiency which would result from the organisation of offices to 'weed out the indolent and the lazy'. This he believed, 'referred more to the fair sex than to males'.

57 Herald, 2, 5.8.1912; Truth, 24.8.1912.
58 Ibid.
59 Herald, 5.8.1912.
60 Age, 4, 31.1.1913; Argus, 9.1.1913.
61 Herald, 2.1.1913.
62 Argus, 9.1.1913.
63 Age, 3.1.1913.
Implementation of the equal pay ruling was, however, short-lived. In December 1912 a deputation of the LSTA won the support of the Minister of Labour to refer the Wages Board decision for reconsideration in the State Industrial Court.64 In February 1913 Mr Justice Cussen, sitting as the Victorian Court of Industrial Appeals, overturned the ruling of the Commercial Clerks' Wages Board. In a complex judgment, Cussen reduced the Wages Board award of 48 shillings minimum to 28 shillings for cashiers in shops and 32 shillings for all other female clerks, typists and book-keepers, effective as of the end of March.65

His judgment was a massive defeat to the equal pay ideal in both theory and practice. Justice Cussen was critical of the Wages Board for not having properly considered the need to distinguish between the sexes in its determination, a distinction which Cussen said was a prescribed requirement under the Factories Act and a factor influential in all previous awards.66 With the centrality of sex in wage determination so asserted, the original equal-pay decision was accordingly doomed from the outset. Justice Cussen’s adherence to the need for a consideration of gender extended beyond a purely legal obligation. Throughout his judgment, the sex of workers was seen as fundamentally influencing the value of the work they did and so, it seems, necessarily invalidated the entire concept of equal pay in his mind.

The minutiae of Justice Cussen’s determination defies description here, there being much discussion of the different kinds of offices, job classifications, and apprentice ratios. In summary, he expressed three main concerns. Firstly, he was entirely in agreement with the LSTA claim that equal pay would entail job losses for women and was much impressed with the evidence presented by Cameron in support of the view that most female clerks were opposed to equal pay. He was, therefore, highly critical of the FCU:

64 Argus, 19.12.1912.
66 Ibid., p.146.
When it was put to the...Clerks’ Union, which I assume, is composed mainly of males, that the result of the determination was in many cases disastrous, the answer made was that these girls must be sacrificed for the good of the cause as a whole. Considering that they can be numbered probably in the hundreds this seems rather a dear price to pay to uphold the majority. And I can find nothing in the Act of Parliament [i.e. Factories Act] which leads me to think that it was intended that any such wholesale slaughter of innocents should take place’.67

He was, of course, quite correct in this observation. The FCU had made little effort to hide its interest in protecting male jobs at the expense of its women members. In contrast to Justice Higgins’ ruling in the 1912 Fruitpickers case, which sought to protect men from the encroachments of cheap female labour, Justice Cussen saw as his role the protection of women from the mercenary actions of men. In the course of proceedings, Cameron had presented a number of female clerks who testified that they had been dismissed as soon as the Wages Board ruling came into effect.68 Mr Starke, for the employers, had similarly called on the testimony of employers to prove his contention that the latter would favour male labour as a result of equal pay. One employer stated that it was the opinion of his firm that men were ‘more persevering, recognising the seriousness of their work better and...more regular in their attendance’ whereas women ‘often have headaches’.69

Secondly, Cussen was of the view that the concept of equal pay fundamentally conflicted with the concept of the male living wage which had been central to all wage-fixing after the Harvester decision. He felt that although there existed wide consensus on the basic economic needs of the male as breadwinner, females had no such responsibilities. Payment of equal wages to women in view of their domestic responsibilities, he argued, would, impose an unfair burden on employers because

67 Ibid.
68 Age, 18.2.1913, p.10.
69 Ibid.
As is only natural, some of the best girls are those who are not allowed to remain. Fortunately, they marry, and fortunately, also, for the community...they do not return to employment. Considerations such as these insensibly react on the minds of females. They frequently regard their work as a thing apart, and far from being their whole existence.\(^{70}\)

The third reason for Justice Cussen’s opposition to equal pay was his fear of its social ramifications. Having expressed his personal prescription of woman’s role in society, he disclaimed any suggestion that his role was to ‘cause huge upheavals in the existing order’.\(^{71}\) The issue of sexual equality was, he argued, best left to the Parliament to consider.\(^{72}\) Early in his judgment, he had argued that he would adopt the sexual distinction as the basis of the Clerks’ award because the complex nature of the various clerical classifications defied individual assessment.\(^{73}\) It is clear, however, that not only analytical expediency caused him to adopt such an approach. Towards the end of his judgment, Justice Cussen rejected outright the entire concept of equal pay and revealed that it was unlikely, from the start, that he would have upheld the Wages Board decision. Equal pay was described by him as ‘ambiguous’, ‘useless and impractical’ and ‘a breeder of fallacies...of numerous progeny’.\(^{74}\)

As the final adjudicator, Justice Cussen’s ruling spelt defeat for the FCU. Mulcahy described the decision as the ‘cruelest determination that had ever been made’, a ruling which could only perpetuate the exploitation of women.\(^{75}\) Several letters in the press also complained that he had ‘legalised sweating’.\(^{76}\) One woman clerk pointed out that Justice Cussen’s benevolence was entirely misplaced as the ‘protected’ female would now be ‘driven by poverty and economic injustice’ on to the city streets to earn a living.\(^{77}\)


\(^{71}\) Ibid.

\(^{72}\) Ibid.

\(^{73}\) Ibid.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., p.145.

\(^{75}\) Age, 15.3.1913, p.13.

\(^{76}\) Ibid.

\(^{77}\) Ibid.
The most damning aspect of the determination in the long term was the outright rejection of the entire concept of equal pay. Notwithstanding the variety of pragmatic reasons for utilising sexual delineation in the application of a complex award, his conviction that the equal pay ideal was absurd clearly had been the underlying influence on his decision. Thus was revealed the major weakness of the equal pay advocacy of Labor women: Equal pay for equal work would falter so long as their opponents could convincingly argue that women’s work was inferior to that of men. And, in a period when the prevailing sexual and social mores promoted domesticity as woman’s natural sphere, the very mores which had indeed permeated Justice Cussen’s judgment, the opponents of equal pay were clearly in a strong position to make exactly that kind of argument. Moreover, Labor women themselves had, if unintentionally, perpetuated those same beliefs within their own industrial policies which, in their concern for protective legislation for females, seemed to stress the particular disabilities of women workers in comparison with men.

Despite the apparent internal contradiction in Labor women’s policies, it is important to recognise that in practical terms their ability to present their case for women’s rights had been severely restricted. The handling of the FCU’s equal pay campaign, in its subordination of women’s interests and Mulcahy’s backseat role within the union, illustrated the extent to which equal pay had been taken out of the hands of Labor women and had become a male strategy. For example, although Mulcahy had been appointed to represent female clerks, all of the formal negotiation and public statements remained in the hands of the Victorian Secretary E. Chambers. While Justice Cussen acknowledged in his judgment the role of Eleanor Cameron in the LSTA, he seemed to be unaware of the women’s section of the FCU. He believed that there had been ‘little or no organisation by female clerks’.

A further indication that female unionists were struggling to assert their rights within male-dominated unions is given by Sara Lewis’s battles as head of the FHCU with the leader of the male Hotel and Caterers’ Union (HCU), Mr Strachan, over women’s wage claims. In a period coinciding with Justice Cussen’s review of the Commercial Clerks’ equal pay award, Lewis was at loggerheads with Strachan

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over the HCU log which was then before the Hotel Employees’ Wages Board. In October 1912 Lewis complained to the THC Executive that members of the HCU had consulted with the members of her FHCU concerning the log without her consent or presence. At a meeting of the FHCU in early 1913 Lewis responded to male interference in her union by passing a resolution of the FHCU that no man could belong to the women’s union or even be present at meetings, and promptly expelled Strachan.

Although the specific details are not recorded, it is likely that the root of the friction lay in Lewis’ apparent criticism of Strachan’s control of the female aspects of the HCU’s log of claims before the Wages Board. Strachan complained to the Central Executive that Lewis’ evidence before the board had ‘killed [their] case stone dead’ and that she had interfered in the log to which the female union members had agreed prior to her involvement. He also charged that Lewis had advised women of the Geelong branch not to pay their union dues.

Lewis’ side of the story, however, illustrates that her object was to obtain ‘more representation on the Wages Board’ for the FHCU. If Lewis had foiled the HCU’s log, it seems likely that she believed it failed to reflect her members’ interests and opted out of the HCU log altogether. The Trades Hall Central Executive showed little interest in her concerns in this matter and, in its customary form of rebuke towards Lewis, instructed her to ‘fall in line with the suggestions of the men’s union…in the interests of unionism’.

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79 Melbourne Trades Hall Council, Executive Committee, Minutes, 1.10.1912, Vol. 4, 1910-1912.

80 Ibid., 18.2.1913.

81 Ibid., 18, 25.2.1913.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.
It was precisely this kind of demand - that Labor women submerge their own interests for the benefit of the wider labour movement, which had relegated women’s rights to a lower priority, and so led to an escalation in the conflict between the sexes within the Labor Party in 1913.

Ellen Mulcahy was an early casualty in this conflict. The head of several women’s unions, a former secretary of the WOC and, as mentioned above, the organiser of the women’s clerks’ equal pay campaign, her credentials as a loyal Party supporter appeared unquestionable. It seems, however, that Mulcahy had become deeply disillusioned with the Party by 1913, not only because of its weakness on women’s rights issues, but also because of the operation of internal Party politics. Although there is little record of Mulcahy’s personal response to the FCU’s handling of the campaign, her experiences in the union, coupled with other events in the political sphere no doubt contributed to her growing disaffection with the labour movement and her decision to quit the Party two months after the defeat of equal pay.

The direct reason why Mulcahy left the Party concerned the procedures for preselection for the seat of Melbourne in 1913. She had been a member of the Melbourne Campaign Committee for some months, but fell out with the Executive because nominations for the seat were called before an electoral redistribution had been finalised. Dr Maloney won preselection for the Melbourne set uncontested, but after the redistribution, parts of the North Melbourne seat were added to the Melbourne seat. Mulcahy contended that Maloney’s preselection was informal because PLC members and affiliated unionists had been given no opportunity to stand. Clearly Mulcahy would have sought preselection herself had she known she was eligible. Undeterred by the fact that PLC branches in the electorate later endorsed Maloney’s candidature, Mulcahy maintained that the method of his preselection was unjust.84 Suddenly in early May 1913 she resigned from the Party and also from her many positions within women’s unions and stood against Maloney as an independent candidate for the seat of Melbourne.85

84 Argus, 3.5.1913, p.20.
85 Ibid., Age, 3.5.1913, p.14.
There were a number of issues involved in Mulcahy’s resignation but uppermost in her mind was the fact that the current system was weighted against the selection of female candidates. In that belief she had come to the further conclusion that the Labor Party had become authoritarian and undemocratic in its methods. Over the issue of preselection, Mulcahy was also expressing her resentment of the Labor Party’s insistence upon members’ duty to the pledge, which bound all members never to stand in opposition to an endorsed Labor candidate. Mulcahy was neither naive nor ignorant in her objection to it. Her explanations were based on an overall belief that the pledge and the caucus had outlived their function and served only to stifle individual thought. Although it had helped the Party gain power, she felt that now in power, the Party should be more open to internal dissent. She was at the same time critical of preferential voting as undemocratic, stating that proportional representation would give a fairer indication of the electorate’s wishes. She viewed the Party’s support for the end of postal voting as another example of its undemocratic bent. Mulcahy stated that ‘...any party which disenfranchises the people to any extent is an enemy of the people’.86

In the following way she explained her dilemma:

I want my freedom. Unionism is necessary and has done good for the workers, but it is now becoming hampered by being attached to the political machine and being dragged along...As far as women are concerned they have no vote or representation on the labor side, and I am entering a protest to make that voting and representation possible for women. In the past I have done my best for them by educating them and speaking on their behalf, but they have so far gained nothing by the advent of Labor to power. I have always fought strenuously to place women on the same footing as male electors, and am as much a Laborite now as I ever was, but I do not believe in the pledge and have lost confidence in the Party’.87

Mulcahy articulated a long-standing but unspoken resentment of the Labor Party leaders’ strong hand in dealing with its women activists. Her deeper rationale for abandoning the Party indicated that she felt restricted by the Party machine which she saw as inflexible and domineering. This was a feeling she shared with the various male critics of the Party pledge. But Mulcahy’s critique specifically raised the

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
basic issue of gender politics which lay at the heart of her feelings of powerlessness within a male-oriented system. With hindsight, the loss of a woman of Mulcahy’s calibre was a major blow to the WOC. She chose a path which was ultimately unsuccessful politically and sadly, there is no trace of Ellen Mulcahy’s activities after 1913.88

Ellen Mulcahy was not the only Labor woman to feel a sense of frustration with the Party. Sara Lewis was also critical of the Party’s lack of commitment to equal pay and its tight rein on women’s involvement in the efforts to secure it. Justice Cussen’s decision had sparked increasing activism among various non-party women’s groups in support of equal pay. Lewis caused a furore when she represented the FHCU at a large non-party equal pay rally in late July. Three days before the rally, the Secretary of the PLC, Arch Stewart, wrote to Lewis strongly advising her to withdraw her union’s support. He urged her that ‘the object sought would be best secured by effort within the Labor movement rather than by associating with people out of sympathy with the Labor party’.89

Lewis had, however, previously received the consent of the Executive of the THC. Charles Gray, Secretary of the THC, and its President Martin Hannah, both expressed the view that the labour movement stood for equal pay in principle and said they had given their consent to Lewis on the basis that it was not a party political meeting.90 But at a full meeting of the THC, many members expressed their outrage at the decision.91 Arch Stewart won support for his motion that ‘this Council deprecates the action of the THC Executive in co-operating with our political opponents’92 because they did not

88 In September 1913 Ellen Mulcahy formed a new association of women called the Women’s Industrial Association which represented women from a variety of industries, most notably those in which Mulcahy had been involved while a member of the WOC. At a meeting of the Association, Mulcahy complained that women still had very little representation on the Wages Boards and could not expect help from the Labor Party. The aim of the Women’s Industrial Association was, therefore, ‘to make the best bargain for the sex from whatever source it could be got’. Argus, 15.9.1913, p.5.

89 Letter to Sara Lewis from Arch Stewart, Secretary, PLC, 28.7.1913, Sam Merrifield Collection, Australian Labor Party, Victorian Branch, W.C.O.C., Papers, 1903-1964, Item 1, W.C.O.C., Correspondence, La Trobe Library.

90 Argus, 1.8.1913. p.8.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.
view equal pay as a non-party issue.

Lewis took no notice of their objections and her union wholeheartedly supported the rally. In Labor Call she defended her actions and castigated the Party leadership:

This attitude of domination is greatly to be regretted, as it will not tend to impress women workers who have been foolish enough to wait for something to be done for them, and now realise that they must do it for themselves. Surely this is the right spirit and one to be commended, but in a perfectly illogical manner the THC seek to show women that they are entirely dependent by seeking to crush any independence shown by them. Surely it is to the interest of the movement that women should be encouraged in their rights, and it is certainly unlikely that women will submit to be spoonfed in this manner.93

Having been severely criticised for acting outside the labour movement in her advocacy of equal pay, Sara Lewis next sought to heighten agitation among female unionists by planning a course of action which would enable women themselves to take the equal pay initiative within the movement. In late August she sought the permission of the THC to circularise all trade unions with female members ‘for the purpose of pursuing an effective equal pay campaign’.94 According to Lewis, however, there was still much opposition to her request from members of the Council who, Lewis believed, saw it as ‘putting too much power in the hands of the women unionists’.95 At a THC meeting, her suggestion was rejected and in contrast to Lewis’ plan for immediate action, a convention was proposed as a means to first discuss the issue.96

The ‘Women’s Convention’ was held in the last week of September 1913 and attended by over 30 delegates of unions with female members.97 As the labour movement’s first attempt to discuss equal pay collectively, the outcome of the proceedings was to be of great significance. The Convention must,

94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 The exact number of delegates who attended the Convention is not recorded in the Minutes, but at least 27 people spoke, 20 of whom were women and seven men. Victorian Trades Hall Council, Women’s Trade Union Convention, 1913, Minutes, University of Melbourne Archives.
however, be viewed within the context of the tensions within the WOC over the WOC’s lack of autonomy, women’s lack of representation within the Party, and the question of male dominance and self-interest within the higher echelons of the Party. While the focus of the Convention was ostensibly equal pay, equal pay had itself become a symbol of the recurring problem of sexual division within the labour movement.

The women’s complaints on this issue had been powerfully countered by the accusations of male party officialdom that they were trivial and, more importantly, jeopardising working-class solidarity. Support for Lewis and, therefore, her views on equal pay were seen to acknowledge the existence of gender-differentiated interests within the Party. The Party, increasingly obsessed with its own unity, sought to banish from its ranks such differences of opinion, not by improving the position of women, but by suppressing any discussion of the gender issue. Even if the majority of women attending the Convention desired equal pay, they could not freely pledge support for Lewis, whose methods and motives had already earned her a reputation as a troublemaker who threatened to cause division within the Party.

As a result, it is doubtful whether Lewis and her faction would have attended the Convention optimistic of winning greater acceptance of equal pay for women. From the outset they were labouring under a disadvantage with the election, once again, of Annie Whitham as President of the Convention. Whitham had demonstrated at both the 1909 and 1912 Labor Women’s Conventions that she did not support any proposals for greater female power within the Party and that her primary allegiance lay with the unity of the Party. In her opening address, she defined the purpose of the meeting as to benefit the conditions of all workers and not ‘the emancipation of women workers alone’.98 She urged that as women they ‘must organise and organise thoroughly, become strong, and demand what they liked, and they could obtain it’.99 She believed that organisation ‘was the mainspring of all reform’.100 For the benefit of Lewis she added that nothing would be achieved by ‘criticising

98 Ibid, p.5.
99 Ibid., p.4.
100 Ibid., p.3.
methods, or attributing motives. Whitham warned against impatience, stating that 'all reforms come slowly' and that 'they could have no sex division in [this] great movement of [ours].'

In her capacity as President, Whitham utilised her powers over the Convention to their full advantage. She admitted many male delegates to what was originally intended as an all-woman convention, and these men dominated the discussion from the very beginning. Although the aim of the meeting was to plan an effective equal-pay strategy, the bulk of the debate was carried by the men who painted equal pay as an ill-conceived proposal, not yet capable of justification, let alone ready for strategies for implementation. Whitham also tried to prevent Lewis from speaking by repeatedly ruling her out of order throughout the course of the proceedings.

The debate opened with two long speeches from the male delegates of the Federated Clothing Trades' Union, H. Carter and C.T. Wallace. Both men professed their union's support for equal pay in principle, but stated that Labor women should first consider its many practical implications. In doing so, they voiced the economic fears of some sections of the union movement, particularly among the manufacturing trades, that equal pay would have an adverse effect on employment and industry in Victoria. Carter argued that with equal pay in force throughout Victoria, all the trade would be shifted interstate and, as such, he felt that it was necessarily a national issue. And in the long term, both predicted that in any capitalist country where equal pay for women was introduced, employers would take their business elsewhere, leaving workers 'walking the streets unemployed'.

The views expressed by Carter and Wallace were indicative of the prevailing belief among many unions that women were wasting their energies on a basically unworkable concept. They illustrated this contention by arguing that equal pay could never succeed within the existing system of wage

101 Ibid., p.5.
102 Ibid., p.6.
103 Ibid., p.7.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., p.6.
determination by courts and tribunals. In the case of industries where few or no men were employed, they argued, the concept was meaningless. Carter cited Justice Higgins’ ruling in the 1912 Fruitpickers’ Case which granted equal pay only because in that industry women were in competition with men.\(^{106}\) Wallace stated furthermore that no court would grant a woman a living wage equal to that of a man because it was held that ‘a woman who was not married would be able to live on much less’.\(^{107}\)

Although these men believed that they were presenting Labor women with sound economic and political reality, the prejudices against equal pay which they attributed to the courts were, in fact, little different from their own beliefs: their opposition to equal pay arose from a sexual and social ideology which necessarily held the economic interests of male workers to be paramount. This was reflected by the nature of Wallace’s and Carter’s support for the proposal for shorter working hours for women. They seized upon this as proof of women’s inferior abilities which not only negated their claims to equal pay, but at the same time, justified protection of the male right to work.

Carter, for example, claimed that the manufacturing industries ‘could very well be conducted without women being compelled to...work the same number of hours as a man, who, by reason of his physical strength, was capable of doing more’.\(^{108}\) He added that if a woman worked at the same pace as a man ‘she would be a physical wreck within a few months’.\(^{109}\) Putting the same thought another way, Wallace stated that while the equal pay principle was sound, ‘it was quite another thing to prove that it was really equal work’, because ‘a male machinist could do more than twice as much as the fastest woman machinist.\(^{110}\)

\(^{106}\) Ibid., p.8.
\(^{107}\) Ibid., p.7.
\(^{108}\) Ibid., p.8.
\(^{109}\) Ibid.
\(^{110}\) Ibid., pp.36-38.
The two men's desire to protect male workers' interests by opposing equal pay did not, however, prevent them from expressing abhorrence at the extent to which women's labour had been exploited under capitalism. In their efforts to account for such exploitation, however, they revealed the extent to which many unionists who claimed support for 'equal pay in principle', had themselves imbibed the very same views of which they were critical for having oppressed women.

Wallace, for example, claimed that woman had been 'a slave for centuries' and had never been granted 'a fair chance of becoming the equal of man'111. At the same time, however, he asserted that 'he personally did not think women were the equal of men' and were, in any trade, incapable of performing equal service.112 He suggested that 'motherhood...had necessarily debarred her from the opportunity of becoming a skilled or highly intellectual person', but later said that 'the object in life of a woman was not to become an expert tailoress, but to have a home and family of her own, and quite rightly so'.113 He believed that as woman's restricted role in domesticity had rendered her acquiescent to her economic exploitation, it was the responsibility of male unionists to 'help them to help themselves'.114 He argued, therefore, that the purpose of the meeting should not be equal pay for equal work but to consider a more just proposition - the 'relative value' of a woman's work to that of a man.115

Wallace's candour in respect of women's abilities was not, however, well-received. He immediately became the object of a united attack by all of the women present, at which time they addressed the apparent conflict between their policy of protective legislation for women on the basis of their physical weakness and male unionists' interpretation of that demand. It appears that while some members of the WOC had, on several occasions previously, been prepared to concede amongst themselves, women's

111 Ibid., p.36.
112 Ibid., p.37.
113 Ibid., p.38.
114 Ibid., p.36.
115 Labor women had expressed their belief that women workers were not as physically strong as men at the 1912 Labor Women's Convention. Labor Call, 24.10.1912, p.1.
weaker physical strength compared with men's, they would not tolerate hearing such statements from men themselves. 116 Whitham said that 'she could not sit quietly...under the taunt that woman was inferior either physically or mentally to men'. 117 She then proceeded to refute Wallace's contentions and there ensued a wide-ranging debate concerning the cause of woman's oppression and woman's role in society. The consensus of opinion among the women was that women historically 'did not have the same incentive or opportunity to use their brains' but 'if given the opportunity, they would soon prove that they were equally competent in all directions as men'. 118

It was not their intention, the women explained, that the special protection they demanded for women, by virtue of their weaker physical constitution, was an admission that women were not generally as capable as men. They had not envisaged that it would be interpreted by their male comrades as a means to belittle women's industrial status for men's advancement. On the contrary, Labor women expected that their fellow male unionists would support wholeheartedly any policy which would facilitate women's equality in the workforce which, at the same time, protected her ability to fulfil her maternal functions. Whitham explained that 'the highest ideal, the noblest function [and] the very best thing that a woman could do in this world was to add one little life, if no more, to the community, to help carry on the race.' 119 Her concern was that a woman should be granted the opportunity to gain a decent standard of living when 'through no reason of her own, [she] was forced into the labour market, and her weakness was taken advantage of by the capitalist, not because she was a woman, but...because she was cheap'. 120

116 Ibid., p.39.
117 Ibid., p.43. In response to Whitham's reference to women who had succeeded in the 'man's world' of science, notably Madame Curie, Wallace disputed that Curie had in fact discovered radium and claimed that she merely received the credit for her husband's work. He said that in any case 'if women were clever, they were always of a masculine nature. They were either women who had never been married, or if married had few or no children. They could not find any women who were clever, and had large families'.
118 Ibid., p.41.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid., pp.10-11.
It appears that Lewis and her supporters had lost faith in the value of the meeting early on in the proceedings. Having sensed the strong mood of opposition to her equal pay proposal, Lewis demonstrated her political acumen by seeking to bring a halt to the proceedings rather than allow the convention to continue and fail to endorse equal pay. According to the agenda, the motion of the FHCU was to be read in conjunction with the motion of the CTU. However, after hearing the men’s views, Lewis bitterly objected to this procedure, claiming that although she had at first agreed to this, she now realised that the FHCU’s proposals strongly conflicted with those of the CTU.\textsuperscript{121} Unfortunately the minutes do not record the exact wording of the CTU’s motion, so the specific nature of the conflict remains unclear. At Lewis’ instigation, however, the impending vote on the matter was deferred and an Agenda Committee was formed, ostensibly to redraft the motions and resolve any conflict over the order in which they would be read.\textsuperscript{122}

This committee was, of course, a tactic to immediately put an end to the proceedings. Comprised of Lewis’ supporters, (Miss L. Mantach and Mrs Robertson) the committee reported to the convention that it felt that owing to the large issues the CTU officials had raised, the meeting was not sufficiently representative of the labour movement to deal properly with the matter.\textsuperscript{123} It proposed the formation of a council to carry on the work of the convention by making further investigation of the issues raised, and then to advise on the formulation of policy on equal pay. Both Lewis and Mantach argued that there remained much educational work to be done in securing public support for equal pay, particularly to dispel fears that women would lose their jobs as a result. Furthermore, they feared that without some permanent machinery to represent women’s interests, such as the proposed council, the meeting would be pointless.\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., pp.11-12.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., pp.16-18.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., pp.19, 21.
The proposals of the Committee were defeated because the majority of the delegates believed that such suggestions, in effect, rendered the Convention abortive.125 This was the intention of course, but without majority support, an embattled Lewis was forced to continue. Amid great opposition, she moved

that in the opinion of this Convention a Bill providing that women shall receive equal rates as men when engaged in work of the same character should be introduced in the state Parliament House and that the elimination of the word ‘sex’ from the existing Factories Act be asked for.126

The basis of opposition to the motion remained that of the alleged effect on industry of a Victorian-based equal-pay award, and the ambiguity seen as inherent in any comparison between male and female work. There was, however, some divergence of opinion on these claims. The representatives of the Rural Workers' Union, D.L. Macnamara, and Macdonald, both spoke in favour of equal pay without fear of job losses. They appealed to women that Justice Higgins' 1912 ruling signified a growing acceptance of the concept, which would win general acceptance within the State tribunals in due time.127 Carter, however, claimed that support for equal pay came only from those sections which either produced perishable commodities or those which were not vulnerable to outside competition, such as the industries represented by the Rural Workers Union.128 Macnamara and Macdonald had not, on the other hand, disputed that women's work was equal to men's work and gave their union's wholehearted support for equal pay.

The divergence of opinion on equal pay between the Rural Workers Union and the CTU did not reflect a greater enlightenment on the part of the former. Rather, the structure of their industry meant that equal pay - as shown by the Fruitpickers' Award - was a necessary mechanism to protect male jobs from female competition. In the clothing industry, by contrast, the sexual division of the labour meant

125 Ibid., p.22.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid., p.44.
128 Ibid., p.20.
Mrs. WHITHAM,
President Women's Convention.

MISS S. LEWIS,
Sec. Hotel and Caterers' Female Employes' Union.

that there was no comparable degree of competition. There was, however, the market competition of interstate and foreign textile industries and an increase in Victorian labour costs caused by equal pay would affect the male workers' margin by adding to their own wages.

In the end, all of the men were unwilling to support Lewis' motion because they opposed its introduction through the State Parliament. They believed, as apparently did the majority of delegates, that the lack of progress on equal pay was due to the failure of women themselves to join in the class struggle and to seek out the benefits offered to workers of both sexes by the labour movement.

Implicit in such a belief was that women's failure to help themselves by joining the movement left them undeserving of any greater status in the Party, a belief demonstrated in the following exchange between Whitham and Lewis, taken directly from the minutes:

Whitham: They [the women] know that Wages Board determinations differentiate between the sexes as to rates of pay, but what have the women of Victoria done to alter that?

Lewis: They are doing all they can, and they want the others to help them.

Whitham: What percentage of women Unionists are organised in Victoria?

Lewis: Not one-tenth, but it is not our fault. We have 700 odd members in our Association, and we work hard enough for them.129

The significance of the Whitham viewpoint was that it apportioned to women the 'blame' for the prevailing inequality between the sexes: this in turn posed the collective struggle of both sexes together as the means to improve the position of women, and deprecated the need for a stronger focus on women's difficulties, as proposed by Lewis and her supporters.

In contrast, Lewis' views stemmed from her belief that the men of the Labor Party had not displayed any genuine commitment to the introduction of equal pay and that it was therefore time for the women in the Party to plan its implementation. The particular target of the FHCU motion examined above was the consideration of sex in the determination of work performance and wages by the state wages boards and industrial tribunals. Lewis pointed out that as long as such tribunals were permitted to

129 Ibid., p.23.
consider the sex of workers in their deliberations, it provided 'an open invitation for employers to make capital out of it and to bring down wages' as had indeed happened before Justice Cussen in the Federated Clerks Union's case.\(^{130}\)

Another component of the motion was its focus on the State Parliament for recognition of equal work. Here Lewis sought to overcome the employer bias she alleged existed in Wages Boards' hearings and, in particular, the difficulty in gaining female representation before the boards. Lewis stated that in trades where the ratio of women to men was four to one, men represented women in the proportion of four to one.\(^{131}\) Mrs Barry of the Office Cleaners' Union explained how sexual differentiation had also been used to reduce the wages of men by the Office Cleaners' Wages Board. Barry related that after securing a wages board for office cleaners, who were predominantly women, the employers' delegates had then argued for equal pay for equal work in order that male office cleaners' wages should be reduced to those of female office cleaners.\(^{132}\)

Lewis readily conceded that the Bill proposed by her motion was unlikely to succeed in the State Parliament. Its significance, however, would be that any parliamentary consideration of the equal pay issue must assist in gaining public sympathy and publicity for the cause within Victoria, where, she alleged, women's wages were the lowest of all states.\(^{133}\) It had to be shown, Lewis argued, that employers were not philanthropists in their dealings with female workers, and that they employed women at low wages not out of charity, but rather because they were cheap, a discrimination used in turn to lower the wages of all workers.\(^{134}\)

By the time the Convention came to vote on Lewis' motion, it was the last day and the discussions ceased to debate issues concerned with women's economic equality and justice. Far more critical was

\(^{130}\) Ibid., p.24.
\(^{131}\) Ibid., pp.24-25.
\(^{132}\) Ibid., p.23.
\(^{133}\) Ibid., p.18.
\(^{134}\) Ibid., p.46.
political pragmatism, which led the delegates to reject the Lewis proposal for the introduction of equal pay on a state basis and for a campaign which focused on the legislature rather than on the Party. As Lewis predicted, her motion was immediately spoiled by an amendment by D. Macnamara of the Rural Workers Union which added the words 'and Federal' after 'state'. The amendment, she complained, rendered the motion useless, not only because the Federal Parliament did not have the constitutional powers to implement her proposed Bill, but also because it would not succeed federally without a more strongly supported, better funded campaign. She saw the amendment, therefore, as a clear attempt to 'sidetrack' the issue and urged in a felicitous phrase that they should not attempt to 'crawl before they could walk'. She explained the overall context in which she viewed women's position in the Party and its attitude toward equal pay thus:

'women [are] once more being made pawns in the political game, but [are] not going to remain pawns in political games. An inducement [is] held out to [us] like a bunch of carrots before a donkey that if [we do] so and so [we will] be instrumental in getting such and such a thing'.

The assembled delegates were not, however, convinced by Lewis and the amendment was carried 14 votes to 6.

On the last night of the convention, its final motion became shrouded in controversy. L. Mantach, Secretary of the Hessian Bag Makers' Union, withdrew her motion in support of the formation of an Equal-Pay Council on the grounds that the opposition of the men would influence the rest of the delegates to reject it out of hand. Mantach claimed that the men had attended purely to prevent any such committee being formed because 'they are terrified that women might strike out and fight for themselves'.

138 *Labor Call*, 13.11.1913, p.5.
139 Women's Trade Union Convention, Minutes, p.50.
Hilda Moody of the FCU then moved a similar motion in place of Mantach’s which called upon the convention to establish a standing committee, funded by the THC, to organise the equal pay campaign.140 According to the transcript of the minutes, Whitham ruled that it was within the powers of the convention to do so, and the motion was then carried.141 In Labor Call, however, Whitham gave another version of events in which she claimed that she had in fact ruled that ‘the convention was not an executive body and did not possess the power to create special machinery...but could send on suggestions to the THC for consideration.’142 Still another account was given by Lewis and Mantach who both vehemently denied that any motion whatsoever along these lines was carried out and reported that it was certainly never agreed that the THC would be the body to form such a committee.143 They saw the point of the motion, to be that women would establish and run such a committee, funded by Trades Hall, yet independent of its control. By contrast, Whitham had claimed that when she ruled that the convention had no power to establish the committee, it was agreed that the THC would be given the authority to administer it.

The dispute was referred to the Trades Hall Council Executive, and according to Lewis the Executive ‘practically agreed’ that a mistake had been made by Whitham in her report.144 Nonetheless, Whitham’s assertion that the motion was passed in favour of Trades Hall brought out into the open the core issues of male dominance and women’s rights within the Party which had simmered below the surface of the Women’s Convention debates.

Whitham claimed to speak for a majority of WOC women, who felt that the actions of Lewis and Mantach were intended to cause division between the sexes and alienate women’s support of the Party. She believed they foolishly saw in the movement some “vast conspiracy "to down the women”145 To

140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
142 Labor Call, 27.11.1913, p.3. Italics are mine.
143 Ibid., 13.11.1913, p.5; 4.12.1913, p.3.
144 Ibid., 4.12.1913, p.3.
145 Ibid., 27.11.1913, p.3.
Whitham, the economic interests of male and female workers were identical. What set them apart was the fact that ‘women are...generally speaking, bad trades unionists, blind to their own interests, and their work principally of an unskilled character, requiring little technique’ made them ‘a class of worker always difficult to organise’. She said ‘women must learn the lesson which men have taken years to master, THAT UNITY IS STRENGTH’. 146

Lewis and Mantach did not believe in any conspiracy against women. On the contrary, they demonstrated a greater understanding of the differences between the interests of male and female workers and how they were manifested within the labour movement. Mantach asserted that

The women interested in their sister workers are not looking for power, office or notoriety, only to better the conditions under which women workers labour...They get no satisfaction from the men who are in power [and] no help to better their condition...Something must be done, and done quickly, and it must be accomplished by the women themselves. 147

Like Mantach, Lewis’ response to Whitham’s claims illustrated her years of involvement in the industrial side of women’s rights. She was angered particularly by the latter’s references to female workers as unskilled, bad unionists. As far as Lewis was concerned, only someone like Whitham, who on her own admission, had no direct knowledge or experience of women’s industrial conditions, would refer to female workers in that way. 148 Lewis, reflecting over her experiences as a leader of a female union, explained that her efforts had always been to educate women as to the benefits of unionism, but had found that

the organised men unionists are so blind to their own interests that they...seek to deter us from any onward move in the right direction...[In seeking to bring the cause of women into prominence I have not been specially encouraged, having often received opposition from those who should be the first to help. The women know the danger of having unorganised workers. We are awake to our responsibilities and want to get the women workers together with a community of interest to guide them. Women, to a large extent, must help each other, and we

146 Ibid.
147 Labor Women’s Convention, 1913, p.20; Labor Call, 13.11.1913, p.5.
can then stand shoulder to shoulder with our brother unionists, confident of our strength, better fitted for the fight and more hopeful of success.\textsuperscript{149}

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The controversy surrounding Hilda Moody’s motion at the Women’s Convention was never specifically resolved. It did, however, hold significant ramifications for the future involvement of women in the Labor Party insofar as it precipitated a far wider discussion of the power and constitutional status of the WOC. At a meeting of the PLC Central Executive in late November, unspecified members of the WOC (probably Lewis, Mantach, Moody and Heagney) requested a formal definition of the constitutional status of the WOC. The President of the Executive, Arch Stewart, ruled that it in fact had no official standing within the Party due to a change in the Party’s constitution some 18 months previously and therefore did not exist.\textsuperscript{150} He further asserted that the Executive had notified the WOC of this development in September 1912. The WOC delegates expressed alarm at Stewart’s ruling and denied ever having received such notification.\textsuperscript{151} There is certainly no record of the WOC having received any information of that nature at that time, nor was it recorded in the PLC minutes. On the contrary, only a month after the WOC’s existence was alleged to have been declared null and void the body had been applauded for its work by several prominent Labor leaders at the October 1912 Labor Women’s Convention.

Suddenly stripped of any status, the WOC delegation immediately requested that the Central Executive recommend the reinstatement of the WOC to the Annual PLC Conference in April. However, the Executive refused the suggestion.\textsuperscript{152} In the meantime, the only course for the members of the disbanded WOC was to lobby the support of the rank and file of the Party to win the constitutional amendment necessary for reinstatement.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., p.8. Unfortunately nowhere are the specific details of the changes Stewart referred to mentioned in any of the records.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{152} Central Executive of the PLC, Minute Book, June 1911-January 1914, 22.11.1913.
Under the leadership of Muriel Heagney the WOC circularised all PLC branches and affiliated unions in support of the following resolution

[1] In view of the fact that no body representing all the women members of the PLC is provided for in the Constitution, [the WOC] resolves to advocate an amendment to be submitted to the next Annual Conference which shall provide for the creation of a permanent Central Council of Women, consisting of delegates to be elected annually by the [local] electorate WOCs.153

When the WOC motion was debated at the conference, several speakers posed the very existence of the WOC as a threat to the labour movement. The Vice-President of the PLC, T. Carey, for example, argued that 'there should be no sex distinctions in the labour movement' because women 'could meet quite freely under the powers conferred by the existing constitution'.154 The existing powers to which Carey referred were the right of local electorate councils to form suburban WOCs for the purposes of campaign work during elections. This type of local women's electorate committee had always been provided for in the constitution and was not under attack. The WOC, in contrast, represented a highly politicised, central council of Labor women, which at this stage, was viewed as a superfluous body and, to many, a divisive influence.

Several men at the Conference further asserted that the majority of Labor women throughout the State were, in fact, now opposed to the principle of a separate women's committee. A.R. Wallace of the Clothing Trades Union claimed that, as the largest industrial union of women in Australia, his members believed 'anything which tended to isolate the women from the men would be a bad thing for Labor, and would not operate in the interests of women themselves'.155

However, the WOC lobbyists had secured the backing of at least 12 PLC branches, despite the fact that the Central Executive had advised all branches to ignore any circulars sent to them unless they were

153 Muriel Heagney, Secretary, W.C.O.C., 'Notes on Women in the Australian Labor Movement' Trades Hall, 1956, Muriel Heagney Papers, MS 9106, Box 1152/6(b), La Trobe Library and Labor Call, 4.12.1913, p.8.

154 Labor Call, 30.4.1914, p.8.

155 Ibid.
sanctioned by the Executive.\textsuperscript{156} When the critical vote was taken, the motion was carried 76 votes to 56 votes. But as an amendment to the constitution, the President ruled that an absolute majority was necessary, in this case 78 votes, and thus that the motion was defeated by only two votes.\textsuperscript{157} In view of the close margin in the voting, Lewis moved that the issue be reopened the following day, but this too was defeated, by only one vote.\textsuperscript{158} On the same day that Labor women were denied permission to meet as a political body, the Conference did, however, wholeheartedly support a female initiative of a different kind - the food and refreshment room provided for the delegates by the WOC.

Soon after the failure of the 1914 PLC conference to reinstate the WOC, an unofficial meeting of the WOC reported to \textit{Labor Call} that because 'this committee has no longer any official standing a resolution was carried to discontinue the usual fortnightly meetings, and to adjourn for some months'.\textsuperscript{159} However, it was almost five years before a meeting of Labor women was again convened under the auspices of the Party.

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The Central Executive's action in disbanding the WOC was the outcome of two years of agitation over women's role in the Party, which had come to its peak with the public critique of its leadership by Lewis and Mantach. The PLC clearly was unwilling to tolerate any longer the ructions of what it saw as a subservient, auxiliary body. It was not the result of mere coincidence or oversight that the Central Executive of the PLC chose to dismiss the WOC when it did. The 1913 controversy over equal pay for women had been a catalyst in forcing the Party to state its commitment to women's rights, but the task of formulating a uniform policy on equal pay for a movement clearly divided over its merits was beyond the capabilities of the Party. Equal pay was a highly sensitive issue which Labor leaders viewed in terms of the economic and political consequences, rather than as a question of economic

\textsuperscript{156} PLC Minutes, 17.1.1914.
\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Labor Call}, 30.4.1914, p.8.
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Ibid.}, 14.5.1914, p.8.
justice for women. The safest course to take was one which presented women’s rights as subordinate and marginal to the greater cause of working-class solidarity. Thus the WOC came to represent a divisive influence and an unjustifiable expense which the Party could no longer afford.
POSTSCRIPT

It was another four years, in 1918, before a Women’s Committee was again introduced into the Labor Party. Although the WOC had formally ceased to function as of May 1914, Labor women continued to meet unofficially during the following four years. The outbreak of World War One absorbed much of their energies and for a brief interlude, diverted attention from the issue of women’s rights within the Party. During the war, Labor women became actively involved in the Labor Party’s anti-conscription campaign and related domestic political concerns, such as high unemployment levels and the rising cost of living. In 1915 former WOC Vice-President Mary Killury led the Labor Women’s Unemployed Relief Committee.160 In September 1916 Jean Daley and Lizzie Wallace formed the Labor Women’s Anti-Conscription Committee as a focus for women’s anti-war and organisational work.161 It appears that by August 1916 Labor women had formed an informal umbrella group called the Labor Women’s Committee which co-ordinated their work and established networks of support with other groups having similar concerns, such as the Women’s Peace League, the women of the Victorian Socialist Party and the Wharf Labourers’ Union.162

Notwithstanding their heavy involvement in the anti-conscription cause, concern for the plight of women remained important to Labor women. Sara Lewis, for example, lobbied the government and trade unions for funds to establish a hostel for unemployed women and a government-run women’s employment bureau.163 She also urged the Lord Mayor of Melbourne to provide increased relief for the ‘poor of Melbourne’, particularly soldiers’ dependants.164 In late 1916 Lewis sought to expand

162 Letter to Adela Pankhurst, Secretary, Women’s Peace League, from Sara Lewis, Secretary Labor Women’s Committee, 16.8.1917, Report of Meetings of Labor Women, Trades Hall, 16.8.1917, Letter to Sara Lewis from Secretary, Wharf Labourers’ Union, 22.8.1917, Merrifield Collection, Item 1, W.C.O.C., Correspondence.
163 ‘Notice to Comrades’ from Sara Lewis, 15.12.1916, and letter to Lewis from Charles Gray, Secretary, THC, n.d. [JUNE-JULY 1913?] Merrifield Collection, Ibid.
164 Letter to Sara Lewis from ‘Soldiers’ Wife’, Age, 2.8.1917. Merrifield Collection, Ibid.
the Labor Women's Council through the formation of a new body, the Women's Political, Social and Industrial Council (WPSIC). Lewis urged that in view of women's solid contribution to the anti-conscription campaign 'it would be a pity to allow women in the labour movement to drift back into their individual activities without some effort being made to combine [their] forces'.

The inaugural meeting of the WPSIC was held at the Temperance Hall, Melbourne on 7 December 1916. The general aim of the Council was to give support to the Labor Party electorally and to represent 'women and children and the home and the higher education of women socially, industrially and politically'. Membership was confined to Labor Party members and affiliated unions. Bella Lavender was President and Sara Lewis was Secretary. Together with a committee of eight other women the WPSIC held regular meetings over the next six months. In particular, it strove to revitalise interest in the industrial organisation of women. Lewis organised lunch-hour meetings at factories and workshops and street corner suburban meetings 'in order to get into touch with women workers'.

Support for the WPSC grew steadily in 1917 and Lewis reported the 'utmost willingness to co-operate' among PLC branches. Although the Council was formed independently of the Labor party, Lewis remained committed to the idea of re-establishing a women's council within the Party. In early 1917 the WIPSC began a campaign to gain affiliation with the Party as its official women's voice. It sent circulars to all branches and kindred societies requesting support at the April PLC Conference for a resolution affirming the right of women to form their own committee within the Party. The problem remained for the WPSIC that the PLC constitution still did not provide for the existence of a women's committee within the Party.

166 WPSIC Minutes, Ibid., 7.12.1916.
167 Ibid., 3.1.1917; Report of WPSIC Meeting, Ibid.
168 WPSIC Minutes, Ibid., 31.1.1917.
169 Ibid., 9.1.1917.
In anticipation of the constitutional objections of the Central Executive, in January 1917 Lewis drafted and circularised the following motion for endorsement at conference:

[W]e women in the labour movement recognising that fundamental principle of Democracy is "Equal opportunity for all" and in accordance with the Platform of the Labour Party which signifies "Civil equality of men and women", urge on the PLC Annual Conference the necessity of abolishing any barrier which may prevent the official recognition of a Central Council of Labour Women.  

As Lewis predicted, the Central Executive sent a circular to all branches forbidding any involvement with the WPSIC on the basis that it was an 'outside body' which clashed with the constitution. Despite this warning, the WPSIC gained much sympathy from the rank and file of the Party and various unions and won endorsement of its motion at the April 1917 Conference. The outcome of that victory was not, however, what Lewis had desired. The WPSIC was not granted affiliation as the new Labor Women's Committee. Instead, a sub-committee was appointed to draft the rules for a new Women's Central Organising Committee (WCOC) which was formally inducted at the PLC Conference in 1918. Jean Daley was President and Annie O'Brien was Secretary.

The formation of the WCOC in 1918 came about as a result of renewed support for the utility of a women's committee following women's loyal contribution to the Party's campaigns during the war years. In the space of four years the climate of opinion within the labour movement again looked favourably upon the particular contribution of women to the Party. There was, however, a significant difference between perceptions of women's role in the Party in 1918 and attitudes in 1914.

The Party had earlier been in conflict with the WOC because the Party viewed the agitation for women's rights within the Party and in wider society as a threat to the unity of the labour movement. The 1918 WCOC did not, however, carry on the struggles of its antecedent, the WOC. In its first year

170 Ibid.
171 Ibid., 28.2.1917.
173 Ibid.
of official duties, the WCOC's activities centred on fundraising ventures, and its political interests remained within the safe quarter of traditional women's issues. Over the next half a century, the contentious issues which women such as Ellen Mulcahy and Sara Lewis had brought forward between 1910 and 1913 never arose again.

The new body was constituted in 1918 on the original basis for the formation of the WOC in 1903 - that is, to represent the interests of women and children as a subsidiary organ of the PLC and subject to the control and supervision of the Central Executive. The struggles four years earlier of a small band of Labor women to extend women's influence within the Party through a more autonomous women's committee - as a reflection of their success in the organisation of women workers, the growing politicisation of women, and the frustration of their feminist aims in a male-dominated movement - were forgotten.
The story which has unfolded in the preceding chapters has been that of women’s experiences of, and responses to their involvement in spheres firmly oriented towards masculine achievement between 1888 and 1914. Historians have, in the past, not fully recognised the distinct experiences of women within processes and structures dominated by men. In Australian labour historiography, working-class women have commonly been presented as a hapless lot who have displayed little or no talent for advancing their own interests, as both workers and as political and industrial activists. As this thesis has shown, however, working-class women faced severe economic and gender-based constraints on their ability to win improvements in their wages and conditions on the factory floor, and in the industrial and political wings of the labour movement.

While it is true that in the late nineteenth century female workers did not form unions, the same can be said of the majority of unskilled male workers in this period. The belief that women, in comparison with men, have lacked the aspiration and the economic necessity to claim a serious stake in the workforce has underestimated the need of working-class women to support themselves, as well as the various informal strategies they adopted to deal with unsatisfactory working conditions. As chapter one has shown, in a period before widespread unionisation, unskilled workers of both sexes seldom negotiated with their employer through a union and at the Guest factory, it was found that the men did not display an appreciably higher sense of loyalty or stability in their work patterns than the women.

The men did, however, benefit from higher wages and the greater tolerance of their employer to male defiance of his wishes. The difference between the male and female experiences of work was shown therefore to have limited the women’s options of resistance. Although the females manifested some similar responses to those of the males, their ability to improve the circumstances of their employment was tempered by their greater economic insecurity. The more stringent conditions in the Girls’ Department, together with the risk of unemployment and the fewer job opportunities for women in the smaller female labour market left them more vulnerable to exploitation by their employer.
In the early decades of the twentieth century the vulnerability of female workers was a problem which the women of the Labor Party energetically sought to eradicate. Alongside their role as Labor Party propagandists, Labor women began a campaign to advance the interests of working-class women industrially as well as politically with the establishment of female unions. At the peak of their organisational strength during 1912 and 1913, however, female unionists found that their subordinate role in the male-dominated Labor Party prevented them from displaying any initiative on women’s rights issues. The demands of class solidarity and the higher priority given to the interests of male breadwinners by the labour movement had increasingly hampered the achievement of Labor women’s feminist aims.

The conflict between class and gender, intensified during the equal pay controversy of 1912 and 1913, was manifested in the Labor Party’s desire to put an end to agitations of Labor women both over the limited status of WOC and over the Party’s failure to support the women’s demands for an equal pay campaign. The Party’s disapproval of Labor women’s initiatives weighed heavily on the personal loyalties of these women, causing fissures within the WOC, and this hindered the formation of a united feminist lobby within the Party. The continued determination of several leading female unionists to win the acceptance of their policies was, however, rendered impotent within a Party which subordinated women’s interests to the wider exigencies of class politics.

In this important period, when Victoria’s economic and political structures were taking shape, working-class women did not passively accept their inequality, but sought to challenge the discrimination against them, as workers, as leaders of female labour and as political activists. The purpose of this thesis has been to contextualise the struggles of these women to advance their interests on their own terms. From the viewpoint that the sexual division of society has fundamentally differentiated the experiences of men and women, it has been argued that the responses of these women were therefore often different from those of men, but no less worthwhile. In the early decades of this century a significant battle was fought by Labor women for the extension of their influence within the male-dominated structures of the labour movement. In an environment where women’s strategies were continually opposed by forces beyond their control, it has been shown that women did not, however, fail to take a stand.
Distribution of Weekly Wage Rates of Female Workers, T. B. Guest and Company, 1889 - 1891. Source: Engagement Book, January 1889 - December 1890, University of Melbourne Archives

Number of female workers (Total number = 89)
Employment of new female staff, T. B. Guest and Company, 1890 - 1898.
Source: Engagement Book, 1888-1898, University of Melbourne Archives
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