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Addressing Work: industrial women and organising in the interwar years

Abstract:

In the 1920s and 30s female labour organisers were confronted by industrial, economic, social and legislative climates endemically hostile to women. In response, collaborative activism between female organisers and construction of a high profile amongst their union memberships became especially critical to industrial organising on behalf of the female worker. These factors were integral then to women's effective labour activism: I argue that they remain so today. In support of this argument, this paper presents an overview of organising work in the interwar years in New South Wales in certain trade unions. By investigating the gendered employment climate within trade unions it identifies factors influencing the strategies of women organising industrially on behalf of working women and girls. Focusing on the working climate and tactics of female organisers, the paper also highlights the critical role and the craft of the organiser as the face of the union for members, including reference to male organisers, and suggests links between members and their elected hierarchy.

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'It is not to be wondered at that class hatreds should grow when a wage rate is fixed which is as near to the poverty line as one can get...less pay to women workers being nothing but exploitation.'
Imelda Cashman in *The Printing Trades Journal*, 18 June 1918ⁱ

'We have, and will continue to, make public the long hours worked and the disgracefully low wages received by these women.' Eileen Powell in *The Railroad*, 14 December 1937 p. 6.

This paper examines interwar industrial organising in New South Wales, particularly organising for women workers, and especially organising for women in the printing industry.ⁱⁱ Despite the historical focus on interwar Sydney, the industrial situations and the women discussed are part of the extended labour context for the federal arbitration system which existed between 1904 and 1996, that was connected by federal unions and labour networks, and that informed post-1996 resistance to neo-conservative 'workplace' relations. Labour market and regulatory framework changes to interwar industrial representation underpin the analysis, but my primary focus is the occupation and processes of union organising. The overview of issues and tactics derives from my doctoral study on female organisers, and aims to raise awareness amongst union practitioners and activists, academic analysts, and policy makers, of the historical base of women's organising and of significant continuities in union organising strategies.ⁱⁱⁱ

Through a case study approach to organising in separate industries the paper illustrates challenges for Sydney-based organisers in the interwar years. It also suggests how female and male officials approached workplace advocacy, either separately or in cooperation. This provides insight into the nature of organising for women, and the industrial negotiations between female activists, including organisers, and male officials or male organisers. I argue that the industrial situations described below cumulatively emphasise the importance to workers of good industrial organising, committed union officials and skilled advocacy at workplace and tribunal level. The analysis also highlights the critical facilitative role of a supportive union hierarchy for organisers in the field. The closer focus on organising for one group of union women - females in the printing industry - necessarily incorporates study of the work of interwar organiser Mel (Imelda) Cashman, former women bookbinders' official, whose organising strategies and industrial networks illustrate my contention, developed elsewhere, that successful advocacy for women workers in the interwar years required collaboration with other labour women.^{iv}

Interwar context

During the interwar years trade unions and the labour movement operated in an environment significantly altered through wider social, civil, economic and industrial shift following World War One.^v This shift at first enhanced challenges and opportunities for women in the union movement. For example, excluding domestic service, the numbers of women in paid employment increased during the 1920s at a rate slightly greater than that of the overall population, meaning that unions had more females to organise after the war.^{vi}

Structural changes in trade unions, including mergers, along with industry and operational changes, affected industrial priorities for women as union officials as organisers, and as workers and union members after World War One. Some operational changes were the outcomes of the wartime withdrawal from the labour market of male workers, with the short-term opportunity for female workers to extend their profile in industry.^{vii} Certain union mergers were already in negotiation when war began, such as the merger of the Printing Industry Women's and Girls' Union and the Australasian Typographical Association (ATA), which together became the Printing Industry Employees Union of Australia (the PIEUA).^{viii} The labour movement was also confronted by changes to arbitration and conciliation, including to the tribunal structure, in the twenties and thirties.^{ix}

Female unionists whose unions (both in the states and federally) merged with their male counterpart organisation included printers and bookbinders, clothing workers and tailoresses, barmaids, and hospitality workers, and bookmakers.^x As the printers' experience shows, these restructures often undermined conditions formerly enjoyed by female workers in women-only unions.^{xi} Aside from effectively diluting previously dedicated women's organising, some mergers were motivated by the wish of male unionists to bring industrial crafts in women's work domain under their coverage, so that they could appropriate and control craft classifications and broaden the power base for male union interests within the arbitration system.^{xii} This was, for example, the attitude of many printers to the craft of bookbinding, a section of that industry employing many women.^{xiii} Suspicion was directed as much towards the strong Women's

Sections formed after the amalgamations, as to the earlier distinct women's unions. Highly restrictive conditions imposed on the NSW women in amalgamation, detailed below in discussing organising in the industry, reflected men's determination that women should not compete with them in skilled trades. Raelene Frances notes fear amongst men, in the early twentieth century, of women bookbinders' potential to intrude on their work. The attitude prevailed even though the industry was not 'swamped by female labour' and even though structures and operations in printing crafts limited female participation.^{xiv}

The three tables appended to this paper reveal a statistical profile of women in paid work and in unions for those years, and show a substantial percentage of women being in paid work in the early 20th century, and belonging to unions. Baldock shows that the overall paid female work density between 1911 to 1947 range varied little - from 26.7% of all workers (in 1921) to 28.5% (in 1947).^{xv} The consistency supports Muriel Heagney's 1935 finding that the wartime increase in the numbers of women in employment did not signal a trend of women displacing men in 'men's jobs'.^{xvi} Indeed, the percentages are lower for the post war and Depression years (1921 and 1933): in these years the popular mythology to which Heagney was responding held that female workers were taking the jobs of either returned soldiers, or of male workers during the Depression. Kingston's figures (Table 2) support Heagney. She suggests that any increases in women's employment took place within the context of work that might be defined as female, or as characteristically including female workers, rather than in a shift from male to female employment. Kingston shows the percentage of female workers increasing in transport and communication (1.3% - 4.5%), commercial work (including clerical work) 12.6% - 23%) and in health (4.4%- 7.5%). The expected dramatic decline in private domestic service (28.8% - 5.8%) was the one exception to increased formal employment in 'female' work.^{xvii} Overall, the Commonwealth's *Labour and Industrial Reports*, drawing largely on information provided by trade unions and trade union institutions, show the estimated national female union density rising steadily from 17.2% in 1916 (double the estimated pre-war density of 8.41%) to 35.1% in 1935.^{xviii} This last figure betters recent (female plus male) density estimates.^{xix}

With the shift in gender density profile and the structural changes which introduced female officials and organisers to previously all-male trade unions, representation obligations meant some unions had little option but to take on board the industrial circumstances of women workers. Issues occupying organisers for women included wages and female rates, child endowment, working conditions (including workplace equity, health and safety), hours of work, financial benefits such as travel allowances for female railways employees, and permanency. During the Depression lack of permanency cost many women their jobs.^{xx} Particularly in unions with more male than female operatives, male organisers covered these workplace issues for women as well as for men: this particularly applied to operational arrangements for the regular country organising trips. Railways and Printers union records show that Sydney's male branch office organisers travelled through regions of New South Wales to recruit, liaise with members and union delegates, identify abuses, and resolve industrial problems.^{xxi} By taking the country organising tours, men appropriated rural as well as city and suburban industrial territory. Not only could this make them more visible to the membership than female organisers, they also earned some conditions privileges over home office bound colleagues. Country organising attracted some relaxation in duty hours, including freedom from Saturday duty as trade-off for the demands of travelling. Where female

organisers had only the city and some suburban organising rounds in common with men, the distinction gave some of the men a comparative advantage over their female colleagues. The advantage was clearly defined in conditions of services for NSW printers' organisers:

'... the time occupied by the Organiser on country work shall be regarded as a normal condition of his employment, and necessary to meet the exigencies of the work. Whilst engaged in the metropolis he shall have a maximum working week of 40 hours to be worked, so far as is possible, between 8.30 am and 5 pm on Monday to Friday inclusive, but otherwise as may be necessary to meet the exigencies of the work. At the discretion of the Secretary he shall be exempt from Saturday work.'^{xxxi}

In such ways, the workplace and spatial dynamics created by contradictions of a necessarily 'shared' commitment to labour, but with male privilege institutionalised and implemented through employment agreements, and added to the heavy demands of union employment, intensified the gendered challenge of organising work for women.^{xxiii} In practice there was a domestic element to the imbalance and indeed to women's freedom to work as organisers. Women, including childless women like the printers' Mel Cashman - had carer duties (Cashman's household included her dependant niece).^{xxiv} None of the fulltime female industrial organisers included in this study had children during their time of working for a trade union. Indeed, marriage itself may have been a hindrance: Ellem and Shields, noting interwar antagonism to women in the labour market, have identified gendered elements in the union movement – in their case, the union movement in Broken Hill – which 'effectively demobilised' married women as workers in the interwar years.^{xxv} It may be that such attitudes in the wider union movement in that period similarly threatened to 'demobilise' female labour activists and organisers. If the threat was less successful that it might have been that was, I argue, largely due to strategies embedded in women's approaches to activism. Female organisers drew on social capital engendered in the labour movement, capital that enabled bonding between women in the same industry and union workplace, and bridging across industries to strengthen industrial skills.^{xxvi}

The next section of this paper highlights some industry-specific organising issues in the railways, liquor and hospitality and more extensively in the printing trades, these industries having been the focus of my original research on labour women's organising strategies.

The Railways Refreshment Rooms: the ARU, HCREU and Barmaids

In 1916 the Railways Refreshment Rooms were taken over by the New South Wales Railways and Tramways Department, and RRR workers came under the umbrella of the ARU. Until perhaps twenty years ago, these refreshment rooms were a travellers' institution, on trains and on station concourses.^{xxvii} RRR workers were vulnerable as (mostly) women, as rural employees and, up until just before the second world war, as workers bereft of an award. They were paid very low wages, worked irregular hours and shifts, and battled to balance their jobs against domestic demands. Compounding these hurdles, the irregular hours and geographic isolation, together with direct management intimidation limited their access to organisers.^{xxviii}

For most of the interwar years the marginalised status of RRR workers occupied their hard-working union advocates. In the twenties these included organiser Harry

Melrose, RRR Divisional Secretary CJ (Cyril) Starkie, and RRR President Miss AF Graham who worked at the Central Railways Refreshment Rooms. Starkie was a porter at Petersham station, and (like later Prime Minister Ben Chifley) was a veteran of the 1917 Railways and Tramways Strike. Graham and Starkie's advocacy for the RRR highlights the essence of successful organising - workplace visibility, maintenance of industrial momentum, pursuit of award protection, and vigorous promotion to members of organising efforts through union journalism.^{xxxix} In the absence of an award tailored to the specific occupations in the RRR, these two pursued variations to the existing broader award to cover RRR work, insisting on a high profile for the RRR with union officials and members.^{xxx}

RRR advocates were also confounded by the limited nature of support from senior union officials. Railways industry politics was affected by residual bitterness out of the 1917 Tramways and Railways NSW General Strike, critically exacerbating factional tensions and involving organisers.^{xxxi} This seems to have been behind the actions of Organisers Melrose and Davis, dismissed late in 1927, when they lodged a series of 26 complaints (against the treatment of organisers) at 1928 State Conference.^{xxxii} They claimed to have been dismissed for refusing to follow instructions from the State Secretary and State President 'to urge the candidature of certain persons for Federal and State Council positions' in the 1927 union elections.^{xxxiii} Union journalism shows a radical CJ Starkie as one of the union's blacklisted 1917 strikers, at odds with a more conservative union leadership. Apparently in consequence, the union leadership failed to fully resource his RRR members.^{xxxiv} Then, in 1928 an ARU restructure submerged the RRR into the Traffic Division and the level of dedicated advocacy was reduced.^{xxxv} Miss Graham became the only elected RRR representative on Executive. These factional disputes left the RRR women dramatically disadvantaged: the loss of dedicated officials and highlighted their need for an award which would leave their conditions less dependent on the quality or level of personal industrial representation.

RRR workers were certainly ripe for industrial abuses. For example, the employer consistently rejected union requests that employees with more than twelve months service should be made permanent under continuing service conditions. The Railways Commissioners threatened that, if the employees became permanent, 'it would be necessary to fix an age limit, as it would be undesirable to admit employees of advanced age as contributors to the Superannuation Fund.'^{xxxvi} Evidently, employer resistance to permanency for already dis-empowered workers is not a new phenomenon.

Management obstructed union access, especially in rural areas.^{xxxvii} Occupational health and safety practice was poor, made worse by under-staffing and by long and irregular hours of work due to overtime, split shifts, long shifts, late hours and poor accommodation. Terrible injuries and death resulted from poor occupational health and safety standards in railways work.^{xxxviii} When Miss Madge Herring was killed in 1926 by a truck at work at Central Station, huge numbers of fellow workers, with ARU organisers and officials, came to her funeral service. Some of the angry speeches which would not have been out of place at a union rally on industrial accidents.^{xxxix} Loss of body parts was a sadly recognised hazard in railways employment: loss of limbs and even decapitation for men working the tracks was not unusual. When Mrs Madge Moodie of the Central RRR lost two joints of the forefinger of her left hand in a bread-slicer, the Department offered compensation of a few days' wages for the time off work. The union

took the matter to a hearing and gained compensation of £120, the legislated rate for the injury and disability.^{xl} Union files show that compensation decisions in response varied wildly, intensifying the need for informed advocacy at workplace as well as tribunal level.^{xli}

There is some evidence that RRR 'girls' supplemented their wages through prostitution, this being their only option against appallingly low wages and shift rosters so inflexible that more conventional second jobs weren't open to them. In a 1923 court case Mr Sherwin, Secretary of the HCREU (Hospitality, Caterers and Restaurant Employees Union), appeared for a member charged with prostitution. He mocked police suggestions that 'as a part-time waitress' on a wage of 25/- per week she should have been able to supplement her wage by 'honest means'. Rather, he observed, with RRR shifts for '3/4 day waitresses' being 11.45 am to 7.45 pm., no other work was available: 'What position (he demanded) is open to a girl before 11 am and after 7 p.m., when she is faced with a possibility of eight hours work during that period?'^{xlii}

RRR workers often staffed public bars and served alcohol to travellers. This was work they had in common with barmaids: indeed many situations characteristic of barmaids, including late closing hours and their low comparative status as female workers, affected most hospitality workers who served alcohol. However, for the RRR the commonality further highlights industrial disadvantage between the wars: there were significant contrasts in strength of union backing and in tribunal classification. The Federated Liquor Trade Employees Union of Australasia (FLTEUA) had covered barmaids since 1910, when it was formed by affiliation of separate unions in Victoria, NSW, South Australia and Queensland. Membership of this powerful male union raised female wages and brought pay equity (though not equal status) to barmaids as a flow-on from better rates for men in the liquor industry.^{xliii} Under industry awards, they were advantaged because their wages were based on the product (liquor) normally dispensed, rather than on their physical place of work.^{xliv} Given these distinctions, the ARU sought pay parity with barmaids for RRR women serving alcohol in the refreshment rooms. It was largely unsuccessful. In one instance, the Railways Commissioners successfully rejected a pay equity claim for Central Railways staff on the grounds that (although) 'they are required to serve nobblers of wine at 3d and 6d from automatic measures, and to sell standard bottles of wine ...they are not required to possess the same skill as Barmaids at hotels or at other refreshment rooms'.^{xlv}

From the mid thirties experienced ALP activist Eileen Powell was the union's women's organiser, with a particular interest in organising for the RRR.^{xlvi} The parlous state of conditions for women employed by the Railways Department, conditions made worse by downgraded representation and diminished union attention, and by the impact of Depression on insecure jobs and wages, attracted her attention. In 1937 the ARU filed a log of claims on behalf of female gatekeepers, rest-house attendants, cleaners and machinists employed by the Department. This picked up on concerns for the plight of female gatekeepers, raised much earlier by Organiser Davis. In 1926 Davis had written that these women were:

the widows of employees who were killed or the wives of employees maimed for life...(they worked) long hours...(and) twelve hour shifts' and were forced to take in washing to 'help fill the larder'.^{xlvii}

This issue was not resolved in the twenties. Powell declared in 1937 that 'We have, and will continue to, make public the long hours worked and the disgracefully low wages received by these women.'^{xlviii}

In 1938 the union finally achieved a dedicated Award for the RRR. This triumph has generally been attributed to Powell and certainly her role must not be underestimated. However it also built on the experience of 1920s RRR organising, though after a campaign now far better known than the foundational work of Graham and Starkie. It was an outcome of carefully orchestrated workplace organising and recruitment over time, of skilled and persistent advocacy, and eventually of strategic collaboration between two experienced and determined organisers – the ARU's Powell and HCREU organiser Flo Davis. HCREU assistance towards the 1938 award came about through HCREU coverage of some of the workers in the Railway dining rooms (Refreshment Rooms) located in stations: those in the dining cars on trains were only covered by the ARU. As Davis remembered of collaboration with Powell:

It was the first award to cover all those workers ... (the HCREU) had previously had an award which covered girls in refreshment rooms ... but when the service went on to trains - either tray or dining car - they shut down some of the country refreshment rooms and the new award was needed.^{xlix}

The campaign was assisted by changed ARU leadership in Secretary Lloyd Ross, who chose Powell to do the fieldwork towards the award on the grounds that a male organiser might not adequately comprehend the women's complaints.¹ His wholehearted support of her organising provided the critical element that had been lacking in the twenties. Travelling into the field to organise, and to interview members towards the award, Powell also met the type of management obstruction and limits to access similar to those complained about by Melrose and Davis. In the face of this limited access, and of likely victimisation of the members, she usually interviewed the women 'down the track a bit' after work.¹ⁱ She travelled long distances on the railroads of New South Wales collecting evidence for the dispute, campaigning through this award process against discrimination in pay and working conditions. Overall, her strategies typified the ways organisers for women sought to achieve, through awards and industrial negotiation, goals which feminists sought through legislation, regulation and political lobbying.

Organising Printers

The Printing Industry Employees Union of Australia (PIEUA) managed industrial issues affecting women and girls in the printing trades after 1917.ⁱⁱⁱ Tensions over the 1917 amalgamation had emphasised socially constructed gender inequities between female and male printing industry workers, inequities which were mirrored in opportunities afforded female and male organisers, for example as described above regarding country organising. Working relationships between women and men in the printing industry were determined against a background of persistent opposition from some former members of the Australasian Typographical Association (ATA). From late in the 19th century many male printers, especially typographers, had bitterly opposed women entering 'their' industry, particularly where those women worked in craft jobs.ⁱⁱⁱ Such men opposed amalgamation with the then Printing Trades Women's and Girls' Employees Union: tensions persisted after the 1917 merger. In November 1916 anti-female sentiment had even been exploited to strengthen the union's opposition to conscription. Men were warned that (Prime Minister) Hughes's push for conscription

meant that conscripted printers would be replaced by cheap labour in the form of women and girls, and that male jobs would be lost.^{lv} Amalgamation was pushed though largely on the impetus of some key male officials, notably EC McGrath in New South Wales, later Federal Advocate for the union, who was committed to bigger unionism and who in the matter of amalgamation defeated the conservatives.^{lv} However, the NSW amalgamation agreement reflected conservative demands in that it barred women from a say in any union decisions not directly, or solely, affecting them.^{lvi} They could only vote in Branch elections if a woman was running.^{lvii} Frances observes that the terms served as a warning to women in Victoria, who therefore held off amalgamating with the men until 1920.^{lviii}

Overall then, Sydney's interwar industrial, social and economic climate meant that, even in the presence of positive hierarchical support, female officials in the PIEUA (and in other industries) needed to be on guard on behalf of their women members against the kind of entrenched opposition typified in the conservatives of the old ATA. Tactically, the resources offered by external activist networks were an essential enhancement to any internal union support. This dynamic is illustrated through the organising work of Mel Cashman, New South Wales Branch Organiser and Federal Council Observer throughout the interwar years. More than some of her sister organisers, Cashman's career thus offers an extended study in industrial organising for that period, with those two decades of her PIEUA employment exhibiting post-war economic upturn and depression, anti-union as well as pro-union state and federal governments, and dramatic technological and social change. Her career also highlights gendered tensions in the union, with women organisers typically responding both to accessing support for their members, and combating industry-based male opposition. Cashman enjoyed good support from her male branch officials, but was constantly on the offensive against the cohort of Federal male councillors whose origins were the old ATA. The vitality of her organising, and her official national role, contributed to the strength of the female membership in the PIEUA. Adding to this, the NSW Women's and Girls Section of the union enjoyed links with interstate branches and political labour women through Cashman's representative role on Federal Council (including interstate travel and associated networking) and her political connections, including with the Labor Women's (State and National) Organising Committees.^{lix}

Organisers' reports make it clear that far fewer females than men worked in printing in country towns.^{lx} In general these women only had direct workplace representation through the male PIEU organisers on their regular country organising visits. All shared the rural workers' lot of isolation, industrial exploitation, and vulnerability to breaches of awards. For female unionists this was compounded by lack of direct access to their women's section.^{lxi} Still, unlike many other women workers, females in printing were protected by awards which acknowledged their working conditions, and even acknowledged some craft status. Gendered conflict over distribution of skilled work was exploited by employers. The case of Alma Hill and the *Temora Star* shows the industrial balancing act necessary to organising females in a union focused on male workers but which, to preserve industrial coverage in the industry, needed the craft skills of females kept within the membership.

In November 1920 the *Star* was employing Hill as an apprentice linotype operator, alongside a boy who, as the Branch reported to the Industrial Registrar, was 'possibly' indentured.^{lxii} As a female worker, Hill came under the jurisdiction of

Cashman's Women's and Girls' Section. Significantly for this case, the Award covering newspapers didn't specifically exclude apprenticeship conditions for females, except tactically by banning them from night work and heavy duties. (However, it usually was boys who were indentured). The *Star* was underpaying Hill: at 22 years and performing skilled work, she was entitled to higher rates - either the rates of a senior female hand, or the top rate of a junior hand, which would have been equivalent to the boy's wage. Moreover, if the boy was indeed indentured the *Star* was further in breach because, under the award, its size of business only carried an entitlement to one apprentice.^{lxiii} The outcome reflected a relatively positive award protection for women in the industry: the State Industrial Registrar ordered both workers to be kept on, with the boy to be indentured but with Hill's pay to be increased to the equivalent of the boy's rates of pay.^{lxiv}

Cashman pursued equity and status for women and girls within the overtly sexist climate of printeries and newspaper offices. Cynthia Cockburn has shown that this attitude prevailed, at least to the 1980s, in Britain.^{lxv} Strategically, Cashman's organising combined industrial 'persuasion' with social inducements to mobilisation, including a dramatic class and a women's and girls' union choir. In 1925 she successfully ran as Eight-Hour Queen for the Manufacturing Group in 1925, fundraising for the ALP and the *Labor Daily* and campaigning with the backing of the female membership.^{lxvi} In this way, women and girls who might not otherwise have visited Trades Hall were drawn to its social activities, reinforcing the building's role as an important collective site for grass roots union members. This informal side of organising work was balanced by involvement in State industrial processes on the female wage. Mel Cashman played a pivotal role in Sydney's labour movement as an industrial professional working with other labour women. Organisers and officials used the arbitration system to resolve disputes over award breaches, such as refusals to pay sick leave, or proper rates. Internal demarcation disputes, like the 1925 Federal Bookbinders' dispute on 'the line of demarcation between the men and girls' work', reflected that aforementioned continued antagonism from men in the union.^{lxvii}

I raised occupational health and safety when discussing railways workers. In printing too, union industrial notes and arbitration transcripts show these considerations as critical to managing the industry. Listed occupational dangers in printing included lead poisoning, and 'nervous exhaustion': ideally only limited contact hours should be allowed for dangerous substances.^{lxviii} The five day week, or 'two clear days away' from a noxious workplace, not achieved until after World War Two, was promoted as crucial to the workers health. Nonetheless breaches of awards and of known safe practice were rife. In 1924 the union unsuccessfully lodged a dispute with T. Leigh and Company, Printers in Pitt Street Sydney for breach of the award; females were working on bronzing work in the tin-printing department all day even though, since 1915, 'the award maximum work period for bronzing, dusting-off and washing-up (of machines)' had been two hours.^{lxix} As the *Federal 44 hours Case* made clear, shorter hours campaigns were as much about health and safety as they were about fair pay.

The frequency of award breaches on sick leave provisions has just been noted. This was the issue when, between 1926 and 1929, several females at Sydney Printeries lodged complaints about withheld sick pay. Eventually their union won redress of pay for all, despite indignant protests from the employers. Keily Printery, for example, complained that 'to accept the rule that if an employee informs the Foreman that she is

ill, ... [as] ... sufficient evidence ... would be ridiculous as applied to all cases and would lead to malingering.^{lxxx} The overall union argument in these cases was not against the requirement to provide documents, but that it was unreasonable, when illness or incapacity hit suddenly, for employers to immediately dock pay. Again, the situation strikes a chord on labour versus capital today and capital's political insistence on AWAs which undercut safe work practice.

Laura Bennett has argued that, in certain circumstances and according to whether Award schedules contained a range of rates and jobs, or were more general, women could benefit from there being a flat (gender-neutral) rate of pay for a job.^{lxxxi} The 1930 Market Printery (Test) Case supports this, dealing as it does with a failure to pay 'proper' rates to a female proof-reader. In 1925 Constance Quinn had worked as a proof-reader in the composing room. There being no female rate prescribed for this particular work, her employers were paying a general (non-job-specific) female rate rather than the (male) rate ostensibly applying to this skilled work. For the union, Dr HV Evatt built his case around Justice HB Higgins' precedent in *Fruitpickers* (1912) and on Higgins' clause that 'Where a female is employed to do any work for which a female rate is not prescribed, and for which a male rate is prescribed, the female shall be paid the rate which is prescribed for the male'.^{lxxxii} In November Justice Cantor held that, despite an apparent breach, the employer had been consistent in not paying a male rate to Quinn because other women had also been employed in the composing room on a female wage. In effect, a female rate had been established by usage.^{lxxxiii} Justice Piddington on appeal upheld the union's case.

In August 1940 Mel Cashman resigned from the PIEUA to become a Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Inspector. Federal Council recorded its appreciation of her 'valuable services' of more than 24 years, and of her 'outstanding record' ...of work ... of considerable advantage to the women and girls of the printing industry'. Fine talk aside, Council records make it clear that her resignation followed successive frustrations at Federal Council, with her attempts to secure proper (voting) representation of women at Council being consistently thwarted.^{lxxxiv} She was succeeded in union positions by women she had mentored from within the Women's Section. Indeed, her farewell by 'the Trades Hall girls and a large number of union officials' included women and girls in administrative positions as well as women organisers and union officials. Her friend Carmel Nyhan, organiser in the Shop Assistants' Union, provocatively described her appointment (to the Inspectorate) as 'one of 'the very few commendable deeds of the present Government'.^{lxxxv} However, even after World War Two and notwithstanding her achievements women in the printing trades continued to be obstructed by male factions within the industry and the union, underscoring the critical importance of maintaining strategies capable of withstanding such obstructionism.^{lxxxvi} Therefore, women's industrial networks persisted. It is indicative of this persistence that, as a Commonwealth Arbitration Inspector, Cashman herself became part of those resources for PIEUA women.^{lxxxvii}

Mel Cashman's interwar organising career combined labour activism and workplace advocacy with highly tactical political and social networking. It illustrates successful negotiation of better pay and conditions for her members, and industrial education both through personal contact in the workplace and through the union's journals on matters labour activism, judicial interventions and fostered strategies to advance women's status. Her journalism reveals her union commitment and labour

feminism. It also shows how connections inside and outside the union supported women's organising. Her organising was enhanced by her official union representation on Federal Council, her links with Labor women, her presence at gatherings like the 1921 All Australian and New Zealand Trades Union Congress in Melbourne and by political and social friendships with other activists for women.^{lxxviii} In all of this she was not untypical: as this discussion has suggested these skills and strategies were shared by labour organisers, women and men, in other unions at various stages in the interwar years.^{lxxix} As a cohort they demonstrated the significance and the skills inherent in the often undervalued and complex craft of the union organiser.

Conclusion

This paper has argued the historical relevance of interwar organising tactics to 21st century women's unionism. The issues faced by Mel Cashman, Cyril Starkie, Miss A.F. Graham, Eileen Powell, Flo Davis and other organisers are not dissimilar to those faced by union organisers today. Commonalities are evident in award or agreement breaches, flouting of health and safety duty of care, gender pay inequity and unequal access to jobs, and worker vulnerability in the face of uncaring or unscrupulous bosses and governments. Union committee work in the interwar years demonstrated appropriation of networks as resources, similarly important for women in unions now. In particular, Cashman's women's and girls' committees depended on collaboration among members to share industrial experience. They drew on her leadership, and demonstrated the importance of local mentoring. Critically too, she left an organising legacy which union women built on after she had left the union. Similarly, her sisters, including Powell, founded organising structures in other industries that enabled working women to build and defend workplace conditions against their undermining by male employers and fellow workers.

The scope of collaborations underpinning women's interwar organising illustrates strategies essential then, and now, to supporting the industrial welfare of female workers. It also illustrates the critical facilitative role of a union hierarchy for organisers in their work, and the significance of skilled and committed industrial organising and skilled advocacy at workplace and tribunal level. I argue that the trade union movement today stands to benefit from understanding and acknowledging the work of these earlier, extraordinary, women's union organisers.

Appendix: Profile of women in paid work and in unions

Table 1 Participation and Share of Women in Paid Labour, Australia 1901-1947

Year	% of Women in Paid Work	Women in Paid Work as % of Total Workforce	% of Married Women in Paid Work	Married Women as % of Total Workforce	Married Women as % of Female Workforce
1911	28.5	20.1	6.1	2.2	11.1
1921	26.7	20.3	4.4	1.9	9.2
1933	27.8	21.8	5.4	2.4	11.0
1947	28.4	22.4	8.6	4.4	19.8

Source: Cora Baldock, 1983, Table 2.1.^{lxxx}

Table 2 Industry Distribution of Women in Paid Employment, Australia, 1911-1947

Industry Group	Percentage of Female Workforce in Industry Group			
	1911	1921	1933	1947
Primary Production	4.1	2.3	3.4	3.5
Manufacturing & Construction of Articles	28.4	26.3	23.6	28.9
Manufacturing and Construction of Articles	22.7	17.1	13.2	12.0
Other	5.7	9.2	10.5	16.9
Transport and Communication	1.3	1.6	2.0	4.5
Transport	0.4	0.6	0.8	2.2
Communication	0.9	1.0	1.2	2.3
Commerce and Finance	12.6	15.6	19.3	23.0
Property and Finance	1.9	1.4	1.9	3.4
Commerce	10.7	14.4	17.4	19.6
Public Authority and Professional	13.6	18.4	18.4	20.8
Health	4.4	5.8	6.1	7.5
Education	6.8	7.8	6.2	5.4
Other	2.4			
Entertainment, Sport and Recreation	0.3	0.5	0.7	1.2
Personal and Domestic Service	39.7	35.1	32.6	18.2
Private Domestic Service	26.8	21.4	21.4	5.8
Hotels, Boarding Houses & Restaurants	10.2	11.4	8.2	9.1
Other	2.7	2.3	3.0	3.3
All Industries	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Beverley Kingston Table 4, p.61 (excludes Kingston's 1901 figures)^{lxxxi}

Table 3 'Percentage of Male and Female Members of Unions on Estimated Total Number of Male and Female Employees, 20 years of Age and over, in all Professions, Trades and Occupations, at end of Year'.

Year	Males, NSW	Females, NSW	Estimated Union Density in workforce nationally
1913	18524 union members of estimated total of 368444 over 20 yrs working. Estimated union membership density 50.35%	7102 union members of estimated total of 74891 over 20 yrs working. Estimated union membership density 9.48%	Males 43.99% Females 8.41%
1916	230138 members Estimated total 359575 Estimated density 64%	13936 members Estimated total 83071 Estimated density 16.48%	Males 55% Females 17.2%
1918	227097 members Estimated total 377510 Estimated density 69.2%	16079 members Estimated 88189 Estimated density 18.2%	Males 54.2% Females 21.3%
1920	253393 members Estimated total 407284 Estimated density 62.2%	24126 members Estimated total 90637 Estimated density 26.6%	Males 58.6% Females 31.7%
1925	279673 members Estimated total 475489 Estimated density 58.8%	29329 members Estimated total 105416 Estimated density 28.1%	Male 58.3% Female 33.7%
1930	303473 members Estimated total 523900 Estimated density 57.9% (Junior Workers 91060)	39661 members Estimated total 116130 Estimated density 34.2% (Junior Workers 50330)	Males 56% Females 38.5%
1935	266096 members Estimated total 562348 Estimated density 47.3% (Junior Workers 100720)	44651 members Estimated total 137647 Estimated density 32.4% (Junior Workers 69921)	Males 47.3% Females 35.1%

Source: Compiled by Author from Commonwealth *Labour Reports*.^{lxxxii}

ⁱ *The Printing Trades Journal*, 18.6.1918, p 135, S354, Printing Industry Employees Union of Australia (PIEUA), also at T39 (NSW Branch Records), NBAC.

ⁱⁱ The paper was originally presented in the context of 'Our Work ... our lives', the inaugural National conference on women and work, Brisbane, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rosemary Webb 2004, unpublished PhD thesis, *Industrial Women: Organising, Strategy and Community in Sydney, 1917-1940* University of New South Wales'.

^{iv} See Rosemary Webb, 'Collaborative Women: industrial organising and the sex divide in Sydney's inter-war years' in *Australian Feminist Studies*, March 2007, 22:52, pp. 107-126.

^v Two classic and pertinent overviews of the shift are: Ian Turner *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Labour Movement in Eastern Australian 1900-1921*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1965; Heather Radi, '1920-29' in Frank Crowley, *A New History of Australia*, William Heinemann, Melbourne 1974.

^{vi} See Appendix, Tables 2 and 3: citations below at endnote 15.

^{vii} Raelene Frances: 'Shifting Barriers: Twentieth Century Women's Labour Patterns' in Saunders and Evans, *Gender Relations*, p. 246.

^{viii} Jim Hagan, *Printers and Politics: A History of the Australian Printing Unions 1950-1977*, ANU Press in association with the PKIU, Canberra, 1966, pp. 204-5.

^{ix} For an outline of industrial law change see Laura Bennett, , *Making Labour Law in Australia: Industrial Relations, Politics and Law*, The Law Book Company Limited, Sydney, 1994, pp. 22-28.

^x Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria 1880-1939*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1993; Diane Kirkby, , *Barmaids: A History of Women's Work in Pubs*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997.

^{xi} Executive Minutes NSWTA, T/39/1/13, PIEUA NSW, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC), Canberra.

^{xii} On the complexities of competing male industrial dynamics see Turner *Industrial Labour and Politics*, pp. 210-212.

^{xiii} Hagan, *Printers and Politics* pp. 204–5; Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria 1880-1939* Cambridge University Press 1993. pp. 117-121.

^{xiv} Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria 1880-1939* Cambridge University Press 1993. pp. 117-121.

^{xv} Cora Baldock, 'Public policies and paid work', in Cora Baldock and Bettina Cass (eds.), *Women, Social Welfare and the State*, North Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1983, using data derived from census figures by Katie Richmond, 'The Workforce Participation of Married Women', in Don Edgar (ed.), *Social Change in Australia*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1974, p. 269. (Appendix, Table 1)

^{xvi} Muriel Heagney, *Are Women Taking Men's Jobs?: A Survey of Women's Work in Victoria with special regard to Equal Status, Equal Pay, and Equality of Opportunity*, (Hilton and Veitch) Melbourne, 1935, p. 15. This ground-breaking work was published by the ACTU and distributed to all affiliated unions and government organisations. Copies can still be found in some union and university collections.

^{xvii} Beverley Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1975, p. 61. (Appendix, Table 2)

^{xviii} *Labour & Industrial Branch Reports, Prices, Purchasing-Power of Money Wages, Trade Unions, Unemployment, and General Industrial Conditions*, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Melbourne, Australia 1913-1939 (Series published 1913-1978). See Report Number 2, 1891-1912, published April 1913, p. 12; No. 7, 1816, June 1917, p. 343; No. 9, 1918, July 1919, p. 14; No. 11 1920, October 1921 p 14; No. 16, 1925, August 1926 p. 124; No. 21, 1930, December 1931; No 26, 1935, February 1937. The category 'Junior workers' was added in 1930. It is not clear whether this addition is treated separately from other figures, though this appears likely as the *Reports* continue to state estimates of union membership to be predicated on an eligibility age of 20 years. Note the high proportion of juniors among female workers for 1930 and 1935. (Appendix, Table 3)

^{xix} Jelle Visser, 'Union membership statistics in 24 countries' in *Monthly Labour Review* January 2006, pp. 38-49; Rae Cooper, 'Trade Unionism in 2003' in *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol 46 no. 2, June 2004, pp. 213-225; Rick Kuhn, 'Classes in Australia, in themselves and for themselves', for *Class: History, Formations and Conceptualisations*, March 2006, University of Wollongong.

^{xx} The impact of the Depression on jobs in specific industries, and from causes identifiable beyond the general economic downturn, is discussed in a range of union histories. Regarding specific unions see for example Jim Hagan. *Printers and Politics: A History of the Australian Printing Unions 1950-1977*. ANU Press in association with the PKIU, Canberra, 1966, pp. 241-265; T. Sheridan, *Mindful Militants: the Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia 1920-1972*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1975; Glenda Strachan, *Labour of Love: The History of the Nurses' Association in Queensland 1860-1950*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1996, pp. 121-135.

^{xxi} *The Railways Union Gazette*, in Accession E89, ARU, NBAC; *The Railway*, ARU, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra; *The Printer*, S353 NBAC.

^{xxii} Source: 'Specification of hours and duties of organiser', read at New South Wales Typographical Association Board meeting 4 November 1916, Correspondence, advertisement, NSWTA press release, Correspondence, T39/38 PIEUA New South Wales, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC) (Archives of Business and Labour), Canberra.

^{xxiii} Rosemary Webb 'You could go to the Trades Hall and meet organisers': labour precincts and labour women in interwar Sydney' in *The Past is Before Us, papers from the Ninth National*

Labour History Conference, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH) Sydney, June 2005.

^{xxiv} Information provided by Heather Radi, Telephone discussion, April 2003.

^{xxv} Bradon Ellem and John Shields, 'Making a 'Union Town': Class, Gender and Consumption in Inter-War Broken Hill' in *Labour History* no. 78, May 2000, pp. 116-137, especially pp. 136-7.

^{xxvi} David Halpern, 2005, *Social Capital*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 253

^{xxvii} This view was reinforced by 'Refreshing memories of rail', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 2005, p. 14 (report on the exhibition 'Romance and Industry', on the Refreshment Rooms, presented at the State Records Office of New South Wales, August 2005).

^{xxviii} Correspondence, RRR worker Kathleen Turvey to Divisional Secretary CJ Starkie, 17 October 1925, E89/16, Australian Railways Union (ARU), NBAC; Mark Hearn, *Working Lives*, Hale and Iremonger, Neutral Bay, 1990, p. 66.

^{xxix} See *The Railways Union Gazette*, in Accession E89, ARU, NBAC.

^{xxx} At the same time the NSW Branch of the HCREU was also trying for an award, but in its case was frustrated by Federal union tardiness Executive Minutes for January and July, 1924, T12/1/3, HCREU, NBAC.

^{xxxi} See for example Lucy Taksa, *Social Protest and the New South Wales General Strike*, unpublished History Honours thesis, University of New South Wales, 1983, *passim*.

^{xxxii} C.E.Davis and H. Melrose, Appeal against dismissal as organisers, 16 November 1927, E89/16, ARU, NBAC

^{xxxiii} 'We Suggest the Subject Matters for Enquiry', 3 Page submission, date indicated by content, E89/16, ARU, NBAC.

^{xxxiv} See *The Railways Union Gazette*, 1922 -1924, ARU, NBAC

^{xxxv} State Conference, convened to bring in the new restructure, voted to condemn him for failing to obey a 'request' to attend. Report on ARU New South Wales State Conference January 1928, *Labor Daily*, in E89/16, ARU, NBAC.

^{xxxvi} Correspondence, Public Works Department NSW to Branch Secretary, ref R.A. 26/139, 25 January 1926, E89/16, ARU, NBAC

^{xxxvii} Organiser's report, *Railways Union Gazette*, ARU, 9 June 1923.

^{xxxviii} For a general litany of injuries see ARU accession on appeals and compensation, noted below at endnote 39.

^{xxxix} *Railways Union Gazette*, 10 October 1926, S28 NBAC.

^{xl} The going (award) rate was £90 for the loss of a finger-joint and £150 for the loss of an entire forefinger, *Railways Union Gazette*, 10 November 1926.

^{xli} E89/12/3, ARU, NBAC (Volume containing appeals etc., and including compensation cases, ARU).

^{xlii} Press clipping, 31 August 1923, *Labor Daily*, in E89/16, ARU, NBAC.

^{xliii} Kirby, *Barmaids*, pp. 141.

^{xliv} This was a reversal of the normal flow-on over hours, where shorter hours for male workers often followed the awarding of shorter hours for women.

^{xlv} Correspondence, Public Works Department NSW to Branch Secretary, ref R.A. 26/139, 25 January 1926, E89/16, ARU, NBAC.

^{xlvi} Jim Walsh, *A Woman of Consequence: Eileen Powell 1913-1997*, Printed Epitaph, Sydney, 1997, p. 8.

^{xlvii} *Railways Union Gazette*, 10 August 1926.

^{xlviii} *The Railroad*, 14 December 1937, p. 6.

^{xlix} Stevens, *Taking the Revolution Home*, p. 220.

ⁱ Eileen Powell, Interview with Lucy Taksa, 1986.

ⁱⁱ Mark Hearn, *Working Lives*, Hale and Iremonger, Neutral Bay, 1990, p. 66.

ⁱⁱⁱ State branches of the PIEUA federated in 1923 with the formal registration, under the Conciliation and Arbitration Act, of the PIEUA. See Jim Hagan, *Printers and Politics: A History of the Australian Printing Unions 1950-1977*, ANU Press in association with the PKIU, Canberra, 1966, pp. 214-216, 347.

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- ^{liii} In April 1890 for example *The Worker* reported the refusal of the NSW Typographical Association to admit a woman as member because she could not be a 'journeyman': Historical Material, Trade Unions in Australia. Box 1. File 2, item 940510 coll 118, ACTU/TLC (Qld), Fryer Library, University of Queensland.
- ^{liv} Press release and flyer, read at Board of Management meeting, 4 November 1916, PIEUA NSW Branch, T39/38, NBAC.
- ^{lv} Jim Hagan, *Printers and Politics: A History of the Australian Printing Unions 1950-1977*, ANU Press in association with the PKIU, Canberra, 1966, pp. 204-5
- ^{lvi} Frances, *Politics of Work*, p. 121.
- ^{lvii} Hagan, *Printers and Politics*, p. 205.
- ^{lviii} Frances *Politics of Work*, p. 121.
- ^{lix} See for example Cashman's report to members in *The Printing Trades Journal*, 19 November 1918, p. 267.
- ^{lx} See for example B.G. (Bertie) Eagle, 'Report of Organising Tour on the Northern Rivers', 15 December 1917, T39/48, PIEUA NSW, NBAC.
- ^{lxi} This view is reinforced by Eagle's report on a visit to *The Express* at Harden, March 1917, T39/48, PIEUA NSW, NBAC.
- ^{lxii} Correspondence to and from the Industrial Registrar 1920-1951, 1920, T39/83, PIEUA NSW, NBAC.
- ^{lxiii} *ibid*, 30 November 1920.
- ^{lxiv} Correspondence to and from the Industrial Registrar 1920-1951, 30 November 1920, T39/83, PIEUA NSW, NBAC.
- ^{lxv} Cynthia Cockburn, *In the Way of Women: Men's Resistance to Sex Equality in Organizations*, ILR Press, New York, 1991, p.133.
- ^{lxvi} *The Printer* 2 October 1925 re Cashman's urging members to buy competition tickets.
- ^{lxvii} *The Printer*, 10 July 1925 p. 239.
- ^{lxviii} *44 Hours Case (The Printing Industry Employees Union of Australia claimant and Arbuckle Waddell Proprietary Limited And Other Respondents)* (1924) (No 299 of 1924) 22 CAR 247, 36 CAR 124. For proceedings and evidence see (short title) *Printing Industry vs. Arbuckle Waddell P/L*, Bound transcripts of proceedings and rulings in cases heard by the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, Series B1958, item 1927, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Victoria. p. 32. (The printers' case was not heard until 1927).
- ^{lxix} As worded in *Industrial Arbitration Act* (1912) Printing Trades Group, no. 6 (Female Employees Board) 1915.
- ^{lxx} 9 February 1927, Correspondence to and from the Industrial Registrar 1920-1951, T39/83 PIEUA NSW, NBAC.
- ^{lxxi} Frances, *Politics of Work*, p. 170, referring to Laura Bennett, 'Job Classification and Women Workers: Institutional Practices, Technological Change and the Conciliation and Arbitration System 1907-72', *Labour History*, no. 51, November 1986, pp. 11-23.
- ^{lxxii} Correspondence to and from the Industrial Registrar 1920-1951, T39/40, PIEUA NSW, NBAC.
- ^{lxxiii} *ibid*, 7 November 1930.
- ^{lxxiv} *The Printing Trades Journal*, August 1940, p. 110; Heather Radi, unpublished notes on Mel Cashman, 1978 (generously made available to author, 2003).
- ^{lxxv} *The Printing Trades Journal*, September 1940.
- ^{lxxvi} Hagan, *Printers and Politics*, p. 268. Interestingly, regarding Cashman's organising legacy, Hagan also observes a stubborn militancy amongst women and girls employed at *The Sun* newspaper in Sydney during the 1944 strike over hours. Jim Hagan, 'Craft Power' in *Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History*, John Iremonger, John Merritt, Graeme Osborne, eds., Angus and Robertson and The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 1973, p. 162.
- ^{lxxvii} *The Printing Trades Journal*, December 1941.
- ^{lxxviii} One strong friendship outside the union was with the ALP's Golding sisters, Belle (Factories Inspector) , Annie (Teacher) and Kate (ALP women's official). Mel Cashman (Printers,

NSW) and Muriel Heagney (Clerks, Vic), together with Mrs Rodgers (Miscellaneous WU), Mrs Wallace (Women bookbinders), Mrs A Hogarth (Hotel Employees, WA) were the women delegates to the All Australian and New Zealand Trades Union Congress Trades Hall Melbourne June 20-25 1921. CPA 1920. XIII Subject Files Box 83, Trade Unions 1947/48 ML691/70, MLmss 5021, CPA, ML.

^{lxxxix} On the other side of the continent, Fremantle Hotel Club Union organiser Cecilia Shelley was pursuing similarly determined tactics in advocating for and recruiting members. In words which could well have been Cashman's, Shelley commented on her achievement of closed shops: "if there was one person out of the union meeting, I never slept. I went after them, because I knew one person could break up the lot. and they were all in the Union for a long long time. everybody was in the union." Shelley Cecilia, 1976, interview September 1976, by Colin Puls, OH Officer, reference OH 171, Battye Library Oral History Unit, Perth.

^{lxxx} Baldock, 'Public policies and paid work', in Baldock and Cass (eds.), 1983, *Women, Social Welfare and the State*, p. 269. I am grateful to Anne Junor of the University of New South Wales for bringing this source to my attention.

^{lxxxix} Kingston, 1975, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*, p. 61.

^{lxxxii} *Labour & Industrial Branch Reports, 1913-1939.*