

### Introduction

In 1997, Western Australian unions mounted an unusual campaign against proposed industrial relations legislation. They occupied a portion of land opposite Parliament House for six months as a protest site. Known initially as the 'Workers' Embassy' and later as 'Solidarity Park', the Park today is gazetted and protected by heritage legislation in recognition of the social and historical significance of the campaign.

The Third Wave campaign, of which this site was a significant strategy, eschewed a combative, militant style and, rather, was inclusive, domestic and 'ordinary'. It was designed as a comfortable site that was friendly to all, mirroring in many ways the activities of a suburban family home: cooking activities, areas for children, a garden, various rituals and ceremonies. Thus it promoted inclusive involvement of a wide variety of citizens during the campaign. While the legislation was enacted, it can be argued that it was less likely to be enforced as a result of the campaign, and that the strength and vehemence of the campaign led to the eventual repeal of the legislation upon the election of a new government in 2001.

This article explores how gender-related identities, including those around family status, were created and contested during the campaign. In so doing, it illuminates the ways in which unions use identity issues to press their case. The paper shows on the one hand that the union movement — in a limited way — strategically deployed associations with gender and motherhood and, in so doing, attracted media attention and public support. Overall, however, both official strategy and participants' responses to the campaign largely 'buried' gender issues, instead framing the messages around 'family'. This illustrates the strategic need during the campaign to emphasise sameness, rather than difference, in order to maximise solidarity. I would argue, following Maher's recent formulation of mothering as 'activity, not identity', that it suited both campaign strategists and female participants to emphasise the 'family work' that participants did at the site, rather than gendered aspects of that work.<sup>2</sup> I would also argue, following the work of various sociologists of union activity, that organisers of the union campaign were strategic in establishing a protest site designed to incorporate protestors' *multiple* and malleable identities, rather than privileging particular identities.<sup>3</sup>

This, I would emphasise, is not necessarily a non-progressive or anti-feminist strategy. It is suited to the tenor of the times, in which women are increasingly visible activists in the union movement, and where gender has gone from margin to mainstream in the movement's agenda but, in the process has paradoxically become less visible.

The paper begins with a summary of literature on unions, protest, gender, and motherhood. It examines what is meant by a 'politics of difference', and what that means for the union movement. It then briefly describes the dispute and the campaign. The central section of the paper describes and analyses the construction and contestation of gender, family, and motherhood in the campaign. The strategies used have broader relevance for the union movement, which urgently needs to persuade a broader cross-section of the workforce to join unions and engage in labour activism.<sup>4</sup>

### Background

Unions have been seen as 'masculinist' and indeed 'monocultural' for much of their history. Australian unions created a 'working man's paradise', with the dominant form of masculinity being heterosexual, blue-collar, working-class, and Irish or Scottish in origin.<sup>5</sup> In Australian labour history, the mother formed part of the idealised family that clustered around the male worker, who was in 1907 first granted the basic wage — providing for a 'man and his wife and three children living in frugal comfort'. However, in her own right, the working mother (and women generally) did not merit a defined basic wage until 1919, when women's wages were set generally at 54 per cent of a man's wage. Women's wages were only equated with men's in the late 60s and early 70s.<sup>6</sup> So, until the mid-to-late twentieth century, union strategy — supported by public policy — was for the most part (and there were exceptions) aimed at either removing women from the public workplace or, if they must be there, colluding with the state and employers to ensure they remained as a reserve army of labour. More recently, in the last generation, 'women and work' and 'work and family issues' have surfaced on the bargaining agendas of the labour movement and now receive significant acknowledgement, although real progress on these issues (for example, on pay equity, paid parental leave, and family-friendly hours of work) is often slow.<sup>7</sup>

Hence issues of gender are vitally important for the union movement, not least because women's workforce participation is increasing as men's decreases.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, power lay in the hands of labour movement men. Muir and Franzway argue that 'power [is] understood in male terms. Paid work, political activism and leadership are regarded as men's business. This is sexual politics.'<sup>9</sup> Militancy and masculinity become conflated, as Shute has argued.<sup>10</sup> The origins of the normative unionist can be traced back to the normative worker who, although nominally genderless, is in fact male.<sup>11</sup> The union movement is of course no different from other social institutions in that gender and hierarchy are a subtext in the structuring of both organisations<sup>12</sup> and social movements.<sup>13</sup> What is additionally problematic for the union movement (shared with other social movements, but in contrast to employing organisations) is that unionism rests on a notion of solidarity. On this notion is predicated collective action, which is the cornerstone of union activity. But this can be a fragile and indeed 'unworkable and oppressive' solidarity if it 'imposes sameness and tramples difference', in Pocock's words; hence the debate about the 'politics of difference' in the trade union movement.<sup>14</sup> Put differently, this can be described as the 'class versus gender question'.<sup>15</sup> This seemingly unresolvable tension is addressed in different ways depending on the context<sup>16</sup> and for unions — a class-based movement by tradition, which has had gender considerations grafted onto that tradition — it is a continual balancing act.

Recent challenges to the sexual politics of the labour movement have been more successful than in the past, as women have become more numerous in both the rank-and-file and in leadership positions. Union density among women workers has increased proportionately to male density. While density has overall halved over the past 20 years from 46 per cent to 23 per cent, women's density has declined by 17 percentage points, whereas men's density has declined by 25 percentage points.<sup>17</sup> At the same time as women's relative numerical strength in the union movement has been rising compared to men's, the number of women in leadership positions has also increased. Mezenic found the percentage of women in union official positions in South Australia increased from 12 per cent in 1985 to 36 per cent in 1998.<sup>18</sup> Most of the peak union bodies (the ACTU, which is the national body, and the various state-based peak labour councils) currently have at least one of the two senior positions (Secretary, President) held by a female, a situation which would have been

unthinkable even a decade ago. However, women unionists themselves, and researchers who study sexual politics in the labour movement, recognise it is not just a numbers issue, an 'add women and stir' approach, in both practice and research. There is a need to move beyond 'reclamation' and 'contribution' approaches 'to address the political difference made by the presence of women'.<sup>19</sup> It is about the development of more inclusive cultures of trade unionism. This is particularly so when union membership is declining overall, and conservative attacks are increasing. As Muir and Franzway pertinently question: 'In what ways can the diversity and strengths of women open up new possibilities for union organising and union leadership? How can the interests, needs and concerns of workers be addressed in all their complexity?'<sup>20</sup>

The union movement is caught in a dilemma with respect to issues of sameness and difference as it relates to gender and gender-related identities such as motherhood. Much pro-maternalist discourse emphasises 'difference', particularly women's domestic and childbearing roles. Such a discourse certainly dominated union ideology and activity until the social upheavals of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. In contrast, the modern discourse of the union movement emphasises 'sameness': women and men both have the *same rights* to decent wages, reasonable hours, and to time off to care for children (though, who 'chooses' to do the latter, in particular, is an individual choice and not the concern of the labour movement). The reasons for emphasising 'sameness' are obvious: the pro-maternalist ideology of fifty or a hundred years ago, the 'difference' approach, is historically too fraught with difficulties for the union movement. It produced what (for its time) might be described as a social good by underpinning the notion of a 'family wage', but at the same time it powerfully circumscribed the role of women in the paid workforce. At this point in history, the 'working family' discourse is therefore the dominant one, with the gender roles, and the roles of motherhood and fatherhood being elided and obscured. Where gender and motherhood become central categories for the union movement, as Jones shows in her work on women's auxiliaries, there can be problematic consequences.<sup>21</sup>

The literature on the gender aspects of social movement protest can usefully be applied to union protest. Feminist writers have demonstrated that gender is a pervasive feature of social movements, and that the gender hierarchy is so persistent that 'even in movements that purport to be gender-inclusive, the

mobilisation, leadership patterns, strategies, ideologies, and even the outcomes of social movements are gendered'.<sup>22</sup> Research also stresses that individuals are culturally 'embedded' through the specifics of their social identities, which include gender, religion, race and ethnicity, class and nationality.<sup>23</sup> A number of studies have examined ways in which participants' identities are used and formed — including identities related to gender.<sup>24</sup> People do not bring ready-made identities to collective action, but rather project identities as a result of collective interaction.<sup>25</sup> The concept of 'framing' in protest events can also be applied to union protest. Framing implies that participants actively create and contest symbols and meaning. This work has been used to develop and explore ideas about 'maternal frames of reference' in protest, particularly in political struggle in Third World countries.<sup>26</sup> A 'maternal frame of reference' focuses on women's motherhood identities, and has been used (for instance) in first wave Western feminism to argue that women's 'caring' qualities associated with their motherhood role are needed in the public sphere (Yeo in this volume), in antiwar movements<sup>27</sup> and in struggles against regimes in Third World countries, which are often about very basic needs such as feeding families.<sup>28</sup> However, based as it is on 'difference feminism', the 'maternal frame' is arguably 'inherently conservative'.<sup>29</sup> There are however more radical variations: 'motherist politics' uses historical images of motherhood as subversive symbols in dealing with the state, a strategy pursued for example by the 'mothers of the disappeared' groups in various countries in South America.<sup>30</sup>

Any kind of framing around gender and motherhood that is adopted by the union movement — or by other social movements — therefore potentially poses difficulties for both women and the movement. The historical resonances of 'motherhood politics' in the Australian state are such that invocations of 'motherhood' as identity have almost always tended to prevent or circumscribe women's participation in the public sphere, including the workforce.<sup>31</sup> There is little wonder, then, that by and large unions have abandoned this frame, and have instead adopted a 'family frame'. The unions' campaign in the Third Wave dispute illustrates many strategic decisions based around the family identities of participants that reflect broader decisions by the Australian union movement, but they also illustrate that framing issues around gender and motherhood can be problematic for strategic reasons.

## The Third Wave dispute

The Third Wave dispute was part of a recurrent theme in Australian politics in the last two decades: the dismantling of the protective devices of the arbitration system and its 'awards', and related changes that make it more difficult for unions to successfully organise workers. That theme is at the forefront once again, with significant changes at the Federal level in industrial relations which will also affect state systems. These have even broader and deeper implications than did events in the 1990s in Western Australia.

During that period, however, WA deregulated and decentralised its IR system more comprehensively than elsewhere in Australia.<sup>32</sup> IR reconstruction in WA took place in three stages, under a Liberal Coalition government, as follows:

- 1993: First Wave: individual workplace agreements legislation with a minimal 'safety net', a so-called 'optional alternative' to the awards system and conciliation and arbitration, which led to wage reductions for low-paid workers particularly, and gender inequity;
- 1995: Second Wave: restrictions on unions' rights to organise (largely aborted due to the political consideration of a Federal election); and
- 1997: Third Wave: a revival and intensification of the Second Wave (once the Federal election was over).

The content of the 'reform' has been described more comprehensively elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> Each of these 'waves' resulted in lengthy and widespread protest by the union movement, spearheaded by the Trades and Labor Council of WA (TLC), the peak body of unions in Western Australia. My focus in this paper is on the protest accompanying the passage of the Third Wave legislation.<sup>34</sup>

The passage and gazettal of the Third Wave legislation was inevitable, as the government held a majority in both houses of Parliament. However, the union movement initiated a protest campaign on the basis of the need to mobilise community and public support, both to prevent where possible the legislation from being *used*, and to signal that it would need to be repealed with an eventual change of government.

One of the significant strategies was a space-claiming and place-making device. Initially, at the height of the campaign and about



three weeks before the legislation was passed, unionists pegged out a site opposite Parliament House, under the provisions of the Mining Act. Only about 500 square metres, it was at the end of an open-air car park, in an elevated position that overlooked the Parliament. Significantly, this pegging out occurred on 1<sup>st</sup> of May, the labour movement's traditional day of celebration. The site then became a base for the campaign in all sorts of ways, providing RandR for protestors, and then, once the legislation was passed, giving the campaign a physical, geographical focus. Participants — who included union officials, rank and file union members, and others in the community — transformed the site into a motley but colourful encampment with an array of temporary installations and a burgeoning series of rituals and performances. This was the 'Workers' Embassy' phase. Gradually, however, union members began to build a series of permanent monuments on the site, as part of a strategy to disengage from the site but at the same time ensure that it remained as a permanent memorial. This was the 'Solidarity Park' phase. The various transformations and rituals have been described in detail elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> In short, the union movement constructed a complex web of strategies, partially planned and partially developed 'on the run' in response to events, in which the occupation of the Workers' Embassy was one (very important) part. The following sections give some flavour to the happenings at the site, and in the campaign as a whole, and read the campaign and the site as texts for what they say about gender relations, and constructions and contestations of motherhood.



**Figure 1:** Small groups of Third Wave supporters at the Workers' Embassy site early on a quiet Sunday morning



**Figure 2:** The garden and scarecrow in the foreground (left) and the sandpit and children playing (right)

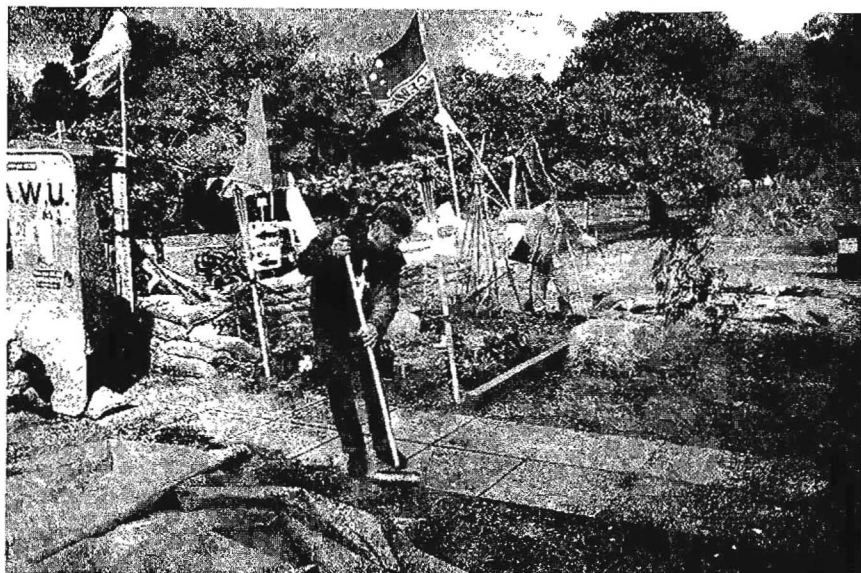




**Figure 3:** Protestors clean up the kitchen area



**Figure 5:** A protestor in domestic mode



**Figure 4:** Keeping the site neat and tidy



**Figure 6:** The same protestor in reveller mode, at one of the balls held on the site



**Figure 7:** Children on a roundabout at one of the Family Fun Days

### Strategic use of multiple identities

The creation and contestation of multiple discursive identities was central to the campaign. The government's hegemonic image of the worker under its legislation was that of a rational, omniscient, genderless being, fully cognisant of the choices s/he makes, and making those choices in a totally free manner, with equivalent power and status to the employer. Complementing this discursive individual subject was another discursive identity: the all-powerful union official who oversees a fundamentally undemocratic union, deploying 'their privileged positions of influence, which they use capriciously'.<sup>36</sup> A third hegemonic figure was that of the 'typical' unruly and irresponsible unionist, male, blue-singleted and liable to violence.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most significant of the unions' strategies, to counter these powerful images, was to play the 'multiple discursive identities' card. At every opportunity, the unions sought to disrupt the images mentioned in the previous paragraph — particularly the image of the hegemonic, unruly male union protestor. The first major event of the campaign was a large rally organised by the TLC on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1997 — the largest public gathering ever seen in Perth. A large number of union marshals were appointed for this rally, and carefully briefed on their role. One of their prime tasks was ensuring that the principle 'women and children first' was adhered to, by ensuring that the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) and the State School Teachers' Union (SSTUWA) led the march, and that other — male — participants did not 'muscle forward' to the head of the march. Deliberately putting women and children at the head of the rally was, in the words of TLC Assistant Secretary Stephanie Mayman, 'a clear signal to the media, you know, shove it, stop transmitting us purely as men — we are the community!'<sup>38</sup>

The 'family card' was used in advertising, as it is in many union campaigns. An early newspaper advertisement, using a football theme, suggested 'You Dropped the Ball...Again, Mr Court! ...and gave another free kick at workers *and their families*' (my emphasis).<sup>39</sup> 'Family Days' were held; one on 29<sup>th</sup> July, for example, with 'clown, jumping castle, merry-go-round, face painting, crazy [sic] magician, animal farm, pony rides'. The 'gender and family card' was used to mobilise more militant workforces, who might not have identified the legislation as posing a particular threat to them. Julie, a union secretary and a

senior official of the TLC, spoke at a mass meeting of mostly male blue collar workers at the Alcoa refinery early in the campaign, appealing to them on the basis that it was not them, but their wives and children who would more likely be affected by the legislation:

You are part of a large workforce, you are part of a strongly unionised workforce, you are part of a workforce that is used to taking action. But I want you to think about the impact of this legislation on our partners and on your children, because chances are they don't work in a workplace like this. Chances are that they work somewhere where there's only a few of them. Chances are they don't have the sort of history of standing up in a unionised way that you do.<sup>40</sup>

Julie here was treading some delicate territory; as a secretary of a union with a large 'pink collar' female membership, she chose her words carefully to characterise female and young workers not as passive and less militant, but as being likely to be in smaller workplaces with less of a union tradition and less power.

At the same time, there were gender tensions during the campaign. TLC Secretary Tony Cooke noted that delegates' meetings — a way of encouraging rank and file participation — had been successfully used during the Second Wave campaign, but in his view they were less successful during the Third Wave:

You would meet up with particular unions dominating the agenda at delegates' meetings, alienating other unions, adopting stances, languages and approaches that really were inappropriate in any setting.<sup>41</sup>

This approach was taken by a few male-dominated unions. To counter this, a protocol was developed and endorsed at the TLC Executive after the first delegates' meeting. This included delegates being given speaking priority over paid officials, and resolutions required from delegates' unions, rather than from the floor of a delegates' meeting. The TLC also developed a counter-strategy to hegemonic male unionist dominance, a Campaign Committee. By means of this committee, the TLC drew together a variety of activists — younger organisers, and people with backgrounds in the community as well as the union movement — rather than the union secretaries who were important in the main decision-making forums like TLC monthly meetings.<sup>42</sup> The more fluid structure of the Campaign Committee, which met at least weekly, could be more immediately responsive than the Council itself. In addition, the social capital conferred by having a membership that was active outside the union movement, as well

as in it, ensured a broader range of individuals shared strategy development and activism.

### Identity issues for Third Wave participants

Carnival and domesticity were the bywords of the Workers' Embassy site. It was a site of possibilities and an enormous range of actualities, with a moving feast of installations, rituals, and performance. It was the primary space where participants could enact other, and often multiple identities, in contrast to that of the hegemonic male unionist. See Figures 1 to 7, which document the early phase of the site's life.

Unions occupied the site around the clock, with 12-hour rosters defining who would fly the official union flag at any one time. The site welcomed all and sundry, however, unionist and non-unionist. There was a makeshift kitchen, including a stove and refrigerator, a barbecue and so on. The rostered union(s) for that shift provided food, talked to casual visitors (of whom there were thousands, especially in the first three months), and carried out various domestic and maintenance chores. A 'shift changeover' took place each evening, with the handing over of 'ceremonial' barbecue tongs, and the lowering and raising of union flags.

The site also became a dynamic public art installation.<sup>43</sup> A garden was created, and gradually added to, with a ritual scarecrow that assumed the persona of Minister for Industrial Relations, Graeme Kierath. A sandpit was created and toys were provided. Many events were held, for instance an Indigenous social and cultural evening, with residents from an Aboriginal Centre for elderly people attending, and a birthday party (*in absentia*) for East Timorese political activist and prisoner Xanana Gusmao. One of the paradoxes of this campaign was that it did not emphasise unruly tactics (for example, scaling the Parliament building, disrupting traffic, and the like) but rather domestic, orderly tactics, albeit enacted in full view in public space. The protest site was for two to three months constantly full of people, partly because of the range of activities offered, partly because it was very child-friendly, and partly because it was 'safe' as a space. In total, as Brown argues, referring to the work of de Certeau and Bakhtin, the creation of the Workers' Embassy was a 'guerrilla tactic', a temporary space within a dominant place to be occupied by the weak for a time.<sup>44</sup> As Sellman points out, events (like the Third Wave campaign) need to be interpreted as triangular contests, not just between the weak and the powerful, but also 'as



social texts performed on a public stage for the benefit of other, wider audiences'.<sup>45</sup>

Strategically, the union movement recognised in this campaign that people do not bring ready-made identities to collective action, but rather 'the collective identities that people deploy to make public claims is an accomplishment of a set of collective actors that derives from their common interests, experiences, and solidarity'.<sup>46</sup> The early Embassy offered a wide range of methods of participation, and thus of expressions of identity: as citizens, worker, mother/father/family member, and so on. Often these identities were 'hyphenated': worker-citizen, unionist-mother, or larrikin-protestor. Metaphors of domesticity and suburbia were pervasive, particularly in the early site. They were not just confined to the more obvious and quirkier creations like the sandpit and the garden. The rhythm of daily life at the site — regular meals, washing up, gardening, filling the generator with diesel, keeping the fires going at night, sweeping the paths — reinforced these metaphors. The metaphor of domesticity and suburbia reinforced the notion of a 'family friendly' site with a 'sense of community'. Language and symbolism reflected and reinforced mobilisation tactics. Simply proclaiming the site as 'family friendly' was not sufficient: the material reality of gardens, sandpits, toy boxes and so forth, actually embodied the message. It was a 'defiance via domesticity' strategy.

The Third Wave strategists were seeking to create the environment for an inclusive solidarity, which recognises the existence of multiple solidarities and emphasises the importance of the 'complex politics of coalition building'.<sup>47</sup> For the most part, participants were positive about the value of an inclusive strategy, with a male union organiser saying:

If it hadn't been for the cook-offs and the good fun of coming and spending time, doing a working bee or a family day or some other activity down here, you would have seen that things would have died off very quickly .... Up here we had to make it look good, because sitting under those bloody tarps wasn't a lot of fun when it was raining.<sup>48</sup>

Another participant, a female organiser, described it as 'a family thing....It's one big family, it's a big union family because we know one another now'.<sup>49</sup> The 'defiance via domesticity' strategy was not universally endorsed, however, with a male rank-and-file unionist saying as follows:

Yes, we do go off in different areas. I don't think planting a flower here or planting cabbages and lettuces or wearing red ties — this

is my opinion on it — was doing much. And yet in the end when I sit back and realise what had gone on, a lot of people do take notice.<sup>50</sup>

While it was a domestic site, most participants went out of their way to reject gender stereotypes. Men and women both did domestic tasks, sweeping, cooking, cleaning and so forth. One female participant, a union delegate who spent a good deal of time at the site, noted:

But on the whole because we're all in it together, men and women, there's no great problems. The women get in.... I've chopped wood up here. But I did it when there was nobody around so they couldn't see the lousy technique but I've done it and the guys do the dishes and clean the fridges out. Everybody just mucks in and does what needs to be done. Occasionally they need a little bit of push in the right direction because they don't necessarily, men and women, notice what needs to be done. But yes, I think it's all worked pretty well together. There haven't really been many moments of tension and when it has been, it's been tension brought in from outside.<sup>51</sup>

There were tensions around alcohol at times, which were gender-related. The same delegate just quoted also said that 'occasionally you can go and say to somebody, "Hey, you guys are drinking a bit too much" or, you know, "You're getting a bit out of hand"'. This woman often took on a 'policing' role, but equally men often took on this role (the official TLC line being that no alcohol was to be consumed on site).

At times, highly traditional views of women's role were expressed — not surprisingly, given the diverse involvement of a great range of people in the campaign. For example, a male rank and file unionist said:

Women...have opened up aspects of public opinion more so sometimes than what men did. They're quite equal in that regard and I think they've done a good job down here bringing the kids down here, keeping the families together...They are very well accepted down here; in fact, they take over. Which isn't a bad thing because you know yourself if you keep your Missus happy, everyone is happy.<sup>52</sup>

This remark emphasises the difference of women, their non-normative status — for this activist — as 'auxiliaries in protest' who did not necessarily know their proper place. However, that was certainly not how women saw themselves in the protest event, and it did not reflect the views of the main organisers of the protest.

Women explicitly resisted engaging in collective, gendered activity at the site. A number of us had previously been involved in union banner-making projects, but when I suggested a 'sewing bee' at the site to make flags and bunting, there was strong resistance from female participants. Banner making projects behind closed doors were an acceptable and pleasurable group activity, but sewing in full view was not: engaging in such a highly gendered activity may have drawn unwanted media attention by focusing on the 'difference' of female participants.

Not surprisingly, participants interviewed were reluctant for the most part to identify and explore 'gender troubles' at the site. They responded to questions on gender issues in a couple of ways. Firstly, by straightforward criticism and anecdotes that illustrated gender troubles, a stance more common amongst delegates and non-officials than amongst elected officials. Secondly, by attempts to reconcile and explain conflict and its resolution by citing the need for a show of solidarity to the outside world. This approach was more marked, as would be expected, amongst elected officials, particularly since the interviews were (if the interviewees wished) to be held in a public oral history collection. One woman official who analysed gender aspects of the campaign asked for her interview to be anonymous, and not held in the collection. She was concerned that someone name the gender issues, but wished to avoid identification. Jo Brown, who with myself and one other was a participant observer who collected data, argues that while many participants asserted that the campaign site was free of sexual politics, 'in the context of the intense political protest which was the "Workers' Embassy", worker "solidarity" obscured and elided trenchant gender dynamics'. She sees the interviews as showing a 'reluctance to problematise gender politics: a desire to keep it subterranean'.<sup>53</sup> I would agree with Brown's summation, but disagree with her emphasis. I would argue that a focus on gender politics would certainly have spilled over into the public arena and could have been strategically harmful to the campaign.

The atmosphere of carnival and domesticity did not persist and, as it died, internal conflict increased. Numbers at the site decreased, particularly casual visitors, and union rosters were maintained with difficulty. In addition, the government issued a formal 'eviction notice'. The question was: how and under what terms to go? The answer was that the unions literally 'dug in' and built a series of permanent structures to create a combination of public park and outdoor memorialisation of the union movement in general and of the campaign in particular. The sandbagged

boundary, literally leaking out onto the street, was replaced with a permanent limestone wall. A range of other structures was created: a rock installed by the Maritime Union of Australia, a drinking fountain (not 'of' but 'for' youth), picnic tables and barbecues, and part of the wall was dedicated to dead and injured workers. So an inclusive, domestic, carnivalesque space became a male-dominated construction site.<sup>54</sup> In the process the site 'lost its charm', in the words of one full-time (female) union official. However, it was recreated as a place which was impossible for the government to bulldoze, as the permanent structures made it much more likely that the site would be preserved and heritage listed (as did indeed ultimately happen, in 2003). So while multiple identities were deployed early in the campaign, one particular identity — the male worker-protestor — did come to dominate the later phase of the campaign. This occurred as the occupation of Solidarity Park came to an end — much too slowly, in the views of many participants. The occupation as a strategy had probably achieved its aims in the first three to four months, with the final few months tying up resources and achieving progressively less in terms of media and public attention.

### **The visibility of family, the invisibility of motherhood and gender**

Eileen Yeo argues that one of the 'master narratives' of motherhood in the Western world was that of middle-class motherhood 'which demonstrated the moral authority and superiority of the new class over the groups seen as lying above it and below' (Yeo, this volume). The working class mother was a 'good manager who reproduced workers, and in many cases good socialists. As noted earlier in this article, there was an emphasis, in countries like Britain and Australia, on women, particularly married women and/or mothers, being kept out of the paid workforce. The generation of women who came to adulthood in the 1960s and 1970s have contested this master narrative and its working class inflection, and have struggled to create more choices for women. However, for unions, the issues of gender and motherhood remain problematic: both in everyday activities like bargaining, and in more extraordinary and unusual activities like this protest campaign.

It is quite acceptable for union bargaining issues — and for protest sites — to be 'family friendly'. 'Women and children at the front of the march' was for a short time a hallmark of the tactics

used in the Third Wave campaign. Here motherhood — using a ‘motherist’ discourse — is directly involved and implicated in the public sphere and, however briefly, evoked as a marker of respectable, media-friendly protest strategy. Mothers are necessary to give legitimacy to protest, to disrupt the image of the unruly, blue-singlet wearing, beer-gutted unionist — hence the highly domestic, child-friendly nature of the early Workers’ Embassy protest site.

However, motherhood is a problematic concept for the union movement, as too much emphasis on pro-maternalist discourses and strategies can directly contravene union aims. Further, an emphasis on gender difference can split the movement at a time when it is essential to display solidarity to resist hegemonic discourses about the power and capacity of the ‘typical worker’ to negotiate individual terms with the employer and to move away from the collective support of the union movement. This raises the broader issue of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ in union discourse. The apogee of ‘difference’ discourses — and union strategies such as women’s committees and women’s officers — was in the mid to late 1980s when the Australian union movement was in a much more powerful position than it is now, numerically and politically. The ‘sameness’ discourse is now stronger. Union leadership, strategies and ideologies are still gendered, but gender differences are elided, at least to external view. Beneath the surface, and there is no denying this, there are still distinctive gender tensions. What is new, however, is that leaders, male and female, are recognising those gender tensions and attempting to use various strategies to deal with them: such as, in this case, the Campaign Committee which disrupted hegemonic decision-making hierarchies, or the Workers’ Embassy strategy which embraced multiple protestor identities in order to stimulate mobilisation and participation. To return to the issue of power raised at the beginning of this article, we now appear to be in a transition period when paid work, political activism and (union) leadership are very firmly *not* just men’s business any longer. Paradoxically, it has probably taken a weakening of the power of the union movement as a whole, to enable a power shift *within* the movement to occur.

While individual participants in the Third Wave campaign may have had strong notions about how gender roles and the motherhood role in particular were to be constructed, campaign strategy as a whole did not attempt to construct notions of ‘proper’ motherhood. Maher notes that feminist scholars face problems in ‘seeking simultaneously to challenge oppressive structures of

mothering, recognise women’s work as mothers and rethink the activities of mothering’.<sup>55</sup> Maher’s own research establishes that women themselves tend to define motherhood as activity, rather than as identity, with women describing ‘the work of mothering as ‘doing’ and conducted ... in conjunction with other activities’ which ‘has the effect of defusing putative conflicts between mother and worker’.<sup>56</sup> In the Third Wave campaign, the framing of grievances around gender and motherhood identities was used sparingly. Rather, a space was created (particularly in the early stages of the campaign) that allowed ‘family work’ to be carried out as part of protest.

**Janis Bailey**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The suggestions of Joan Eveline and Eileen Yeó for this paper are gratefully acknowledged. Photo credits: Janis Bailey (Figs 1, 3, 5, 6, 7) and Di McAtee (Figs 2 and 4).

<sup>2</sup> J. Maher, ‘A Mother by Trade: Australian Women Reflecting Mothering as Activity, Not Identity’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 20, 46, 2005, pp. 18–29.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: R. Zoll, ‘Modernisation, Trade Unions and Solidarity’, in P. Leisink, J. Van Leemput and J. Vilrocx (eds), *The Challenges to Trade Unions in Europe*, Cheltenham, Elgar, 1996 pp. 77–104.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, Australian unions, led by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, were engaged at a national level in a similar campaign, against the Work Choices Bill, and a study of gender representations and strategies in this campaign would be instructive.

<sup>5</sup> S. Franzway, ‘Sexual Politics in Trade Unions’, in B. Pocock (ed.), *Strife: Sex and Politics in Labour Unions*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1997 pp. 128–148.

<sup>6</sup> G. Whitehouse, ‘Justice and Equity: Women and Indigenous Workers’, in J. Isaac and S. Macintyre, (eds), *The New Province for Law and Order: 100 Years of Australian Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 207–240. And true pay equity is still some way off, as occupational segregation and indirect discrimination still ensure that a gender pay gap remains.

<sup>7</sup> The overall benefits of women’s membership of unions — and the disadvantages if they do not belong — are clear. Space precludes summarising the literature on this point.

<sup>8</sup> Women’s workforce participation rate is now 60 per cent, compared with men’s at 72 per cent (ABS Cat. No. 6291.0.55.001) and continues to narrow.

<sup>9</sup> K. Muir and S. Franzway, ‘Editorial’, special issue on Women and Trade Unions, *Hecate*, 26, 2, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> C. Shute, ‘Unequal Partners: Women, Power and the Trade Union Movement’, in N. Grieve and A. Burns (eds), *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 166–178.

<sup>11</sup> J. Acker, ‘Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organisations’, *Gender and Society*, 4, 1990, pp. 139–158; A. Forrest, ‘Women and Industrial



Relations Theory: No Room in the Discourse', *Relations Industrielles*, 48, 3, 1993, pp. 409–440; B. Pocock (ed.), *Strife*, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> J. Acker, 'Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies', 1990.

<sup>13</sup> V. Taylor, 'Gender and Social Movements: Gender Processes in Women's Self-help Movements', *Gender and Society*, 13, 1, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> B. Pocock, 'Gender, Strife and Unions', in Pocock, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> S. Franzway, *Sexual Politics and Greedy Institutions*, Sydney, Pluto Press, 2001, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> C. Bacchi, *Same Difference: Feminism and Sexual Difference*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1990, p. 265.

<sup>17</sup> ABS Cat. No. 6310.

<sup>18</sup> S. Mezenic, *The Slow Road to Fairer Unionism: Changes in Gender Representation in South Australian Unions 1991–1998*, Centre for Labour Research and United Trades and Labor Council of South Australia, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> M. Lake, 'The Independence of Women and the Brotherhood of Man: Debates in the Labour Movement over Equal Pay and Motherhood Endowment in the 1920s', *Labour History*, 63, November, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> K. Muir and S. Franzway, 'Editorial', 2000, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> S. Jones, 'A Woman's Place is on the Picket Line: Towards a Theory of Community Industrial Relations', *Employee Relations*, 24, 1/2, 2002, pp. 151–166.

<sup>22</sup> V. Taylor, 'Gender and Social Movements', 1999, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> C.M. Mueller, 'Building Social Movement Theory', in A. Morris and C. M. Mueller (eds), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> S. Radcliffe, "'People Have To Rise Up—Like the Great Women Fighters": The State and Peasant Women in Peru', in S. Radcliffe and S. Westwood (eds), *Viva: Women and Popular Protest in South America*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 197–218.

<sup>25</sup> M.M. Ferree and S. Roth, 'Gender, Class and the Interaction between Social Movements: A Strike of West Berlin Day Care Workers', *Gender and Society*, 12, 1998, pp. 626–648.

<sup>26</sup> R. Noonan, 'Women against the State: Political Opportunities and Collective Action Frames in Chile's Transition to Democracy', *Sociological Forum*, 10, 1, 1995, pp. 81–111.

<sup>27</sup> C. Strange, 'Mothers on the March: Maternalism in Women's Protests for Peace in North America and Western Europe, 1900–1985', in G. West and R.L. Blumberg (eds), *Women and Social Protest*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 209–224.

<sup>28</sup> R. Noonan, 'Women against the State', 1995; L. Baldez, *Why Women Protest: Women's Movements in Chile*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> S. Franceschet, 'Explaining Social Movement Outcomes: Collective Action Frames and Strategic choices in First- and Second-wave Feminism in Chile', *Comparative Political Studies*, 37, 5, 2004, p. 501.

<sup>30</sup> S. Radcliffe, 'People Have To Rise Up', 1993, p. 233.

<sup>31</sup> J. Eveline, 'Feminism, Racism and Citizenship', in P. Crawford and P. Maddern (eds), *Women as Australian Citizens: Underlying Histories*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2001, pp. 141–177.

<sup>32</sup> B. Horstman, 'Decentralised and Deregulated Australian Industrial Relations: The Effects on HRM and IR in Small Enterprises', *Employee Relations*, 21, 3, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> J. Bailey and B. Horstman, "'Life is Full of Choices": Industrial Relations "Reform" in Western Australia Since 1993', in J. Burgess and G. Strachan (eds), *Research on Work, Employment and Industrial Relations 2000: Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> AIRAANZ Conference*, Newcastle, Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand, Vol. 1, February 2000, pp. 39–51.

<sup>34</sup> Documentation of the campaign is held by Unions WA (the new title of the Trades and Labor Council of WA) and in the Battye Library of Western Australian History, Perth. The interviews are held in the Library's oral history collection (Battye OH2729). Jo Brown, Di McAtee and the author recorded the interviews, as part of documentation project by the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Perth Branch.

<sup>35</sup> J. Bailey, 'Blue Singlets and Broccoli: Culture in the Service of Union Struggle', *Labour History*, 79, November, 2000, pp. 35–56.

<sup>36</sup> G. Kierath, 'Labour Relations Legislation Amendment Bill. Second Reading Speech', *Hansard, Western Australia, Thirty-fifth Parliament, First Session*, 26 March 1997, p. 720.

<sup>37</sup> K. Muir, 'Difference or Deficiency: Gender, Representation and Meaning in Unions', in Pocock, 1997, pp. 172–193; J. Bailey, 'Blue Singlets and Broccoli', 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Mayman interview 1997, Battye Library, OH2729.

<sup>39</sup> *Sunday Times*, March 23 1997, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Participant Interview, 1997 (female, full time Union Secretary).

<sup>41</sup> Cooke Interview 1999, Battye Library, OH2729.

<sup>42</sup> Cooke Interview 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Thanks to Di McAtee for this phrase.

<sup>44</sup> J. Brown, 'The Workers' Embassy: Founded in Space, Lost in Place', Unpublished Honours thesis, 1999, Murdoch University, Perth, p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> J. Sellman, 'Social Movements and the Symbolism of Public Demonstrations: The 1874 Women's Crusade and German Resistance in Richmond, Indiana', *Journal of Social History*, 2, 3, 1999, pp. 557–588.

<sup>46</sup> V. Taylor, 'Gender and Social Movements', 1999, p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> M.M. Ferree and S. Roth, 'Gender, Class and the Interaction between Social Movements', 1998, p. 629.

<sup>48</sup> Participant Interview 1997 (male, full-time union organiser), Battye Library, OH2729.

<sup>49</sup> Participant Interview 1997 (female, full-time union organiser), Battye Library, OH2729.

<sup>50</sup> Participant Interview 1997 (male, union delegate), Battye Library, OH2729.

<sup>51</sup> Participant Interview 1997 (female, union delegate), Battye Library, OH2729.

<sup>52</sup> Participant Interview 1997 (male, union delegate), Battye Library, OH2729.

<sup>53</sup> Brown, 'The Workers' Embassy', 1999, p. 12, her emphasis; p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> A key dispute about the use of space occurred between women unionists, and male unionists who were doing this construction work, over the location of the sandpit. This was moved to one side of the site, but was reinstated to centre stage when the women objected; see J. Bailey, 'Blue Singlets and Broccoli', 2000, p. 51.

<sup>55</sup> J. Maher, 'A Mother by Trade', 2005, p. 17.

<sup>56</sup> J. Maher, 'A Mother by Trade', 2005, p. 26.