CHAPTER 9

Women in the Industry[1]

When discussing women in the industry the basic problem is that of dealing with a revolutionary Union whose leadership was ideologically committed to the women's liberation struggle and actively supported their beliefs; but did so in an industry which is one of the most macho, rugged and dangerous there is.

Much of what is to follow stems from this immediate contradiction.

My main areas of investigation are: the real depth of the leadership's own convictions and to what extent their problems with actively involved women were traditionally "sexist" or a more complicated form of sexism involving a perceived threat to traditional hierarchical and leadership patterns; the extent to which the leadership's official policies filtered through to the membership and hence the ways in which the rank and file responded to female builders labourers on individual job sites; whether differing attitudes to particular women depended on class, age, personality, physical, or political differences in the women themselves; what the main arguments were against women in the industry and how the women coped with membership hostility; how the women organised as a political force within the industry and the effect that being involved in the Union had on their own political development; the way in which the famale clerical staff inter-related with both the male leadership and the female builders labourers; and finally I question whether the whole idea of women working in the building industry was unrealistic at the time, given the backwardness on such issues of Australian working class males generally and the conservatism and lack of support shown by other unions in the Building Trades Group.

The leadership's ideological espousal of women's rights arose out of their belief that the "division between trade unions and the rest of the community is a bad thing" and that "trade unionists must see exploitation - not just in their work but everywhere".[2]

Because the Builders Labourers are the only exclusively male manual union ever to promote seriously the right of women to work in the industry, there is no previous experience or literature available for purposes of comparison. A survey of women's experiences in Australian

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1 A version of this chapter is included in E. Windschuttle (ed.), Women, Class and History, under the title, "Revolution and Machismo: Women in the N.S.W. B.L.F. 1961-75".

2 Interview: Joe Owens, 29 September 1977.

unions reveals oppression and neglect, and even in female industries, a preponderance of male leaders and spokesmen.[3] Rank and file activity by female unionists has mostly remained exactly that, the victim of Australian working class patriarchy. In this context, the election by the Builders Labourers' Federation of a female Executive member and the appointment of several female organisers in a previously all-male industry are quite remarkable.

Before the impact of the women's movement on the Communist Party and hence the B.L.F. in the early seventies, the Union leadership held what could be termed a "traditional" view of the role of women in the union movement. The first time a female is mentioned in the Executive Minutes is in 1965 when Secretary Mick McNamara announced that the Union's May Queen candidate had been placed fifth in the competition which he described as "a very creditable performance".[4] The second reference is equally unfortunate. McNamara reported in June 1965 that the "problem" of women working as builders labourers had again come up.

> He [McNamara] said that last year the Federal Secretary [Gallagher] had instructed him that under no circumstances were we to join women into the union. Bro. McNamara said that this was happening in Canberra and the women had been removed from the job.

McNamara made it quite clear

> ...that the reason the Union opposed women working on building jobs was that employers were taking advantage of the situation to break down wages and working conditions.(5) It was expected that the employers would try to introduce a classification for Juvenile labour into the next award and so we had to be doubly cautious on this issue.6

McNamara's protestations about breaking down of wages and conditions is seen to be the flimsiest of rationalisations when taken in conjunction with Gallagher's stern command not to sign up women. Wages and conditions could not have been affected if the women had been signed on as members.[7]

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3 The best collection of women's experiences with trade unions is probably E. Windschuttle (ed.), op.cit. Little has been written about female participation in Australian trade unions. Most labour history concerning women relates to their participation in the workforce rather than specifically to trade unions. See E. Ryan and A. Conlon, Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work 1788-1974, Melbourne, 1975.

4 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 4 May 1965.

5 In classic "White Australia" jargon.

6 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 22 June 1965. Not content with "woman as coolie" imagery we also get "woman as child".

7 Cleaning up on building sites is builders labourers' work. Many men as well as women are not aware of this and subcontractors often take advantage of this situation and pay non-B.L.F. rates. This "breaking down of wages" could not possibly be blamed on the women cleaners.

The temporary organiser in Canberra at the time was Jack Mundey. He reported in July that the employer involved would be prosecuted for a breach of the award. The court had ruled, after an inspection by Commissioner Findlay, that women would not be employed in the industry.[8] This court ruling prompted the Executive to take the curious decision to tell two women subcontractors who had been discovered doing similar work[9] (cleaning windows) in Sydney that they should "only employ men who are members of the Builders Labourers' Federation".[10] At the General Branch Meeting McNamara reported to the (no doubt relieved) membership that "the Union had been successful in getting the women removed from the job" and repeated his allegations about breaking down of wages and conditions. He said "the Union principally was not opposed to women as such".[11]

McNamara himself may not have been opposed to "women as such" but he was certainly opposed to women on building sites. In a much publicised press statement he argued:

> This union is perhaps the last male stronghold, and it will stay that way in the interests of the women themselves...I know women are employed in Socialist countries on building projects, but I disagree with this and we will never allow our wives, sweethearts and daughters to move into this rugged industry.12

There were some officials who argued that women should be allowed into the Union, Jack Mundey in particular fought to have the decision ameliorated and eventually reversed.[13] It took until December 1966 before the case was finally resolved. The Secretary reported that "the decision given favoured the Builders Labourers' Federation in that equal pay was to be paid the female employees and that separate amenities were to be provided".[14]

However, despite or perhaps because of their reluctant acceptance,

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8 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 6 July 1965.
9 Ibid.
10 Even if "men" is used in its generic sense it is unfortunate wording.
11 Minutes: General Meeting, 6 July 1965.
12 Sun, 17 June 1965. Tom Hogan (Interview: 28 October 1977) recalls that McNamara was not the only B.L. aghast at the thought of women in the industry. I remember an incident in 1974 where one of the male B.Ls discovered an old press clipping of this announcement in the office and confident in his new-found non-sexism pinned it to the notice board where it caused much merriment amongst the organisers.
13 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 17 August 1965.
14 A cry with a certain ring of deja vu - "separate amenities" was to continue to raise its familiar yet ugly head.

women faded from the industry and the men continued their unthreatened existence making "correct" gestures such as purchasing "$3 worth of stamps as requested by the International Women's Day Committee";[15] congratulating the nurses "for their demonstration last week" and pledging "any support in the future";[16] and sending a delegate to the Equal Pay Seminar arranged by the Trades Hall.[17]

In 1968 it was reported that "a May Day Candidate had been selected"[18] and in 1969 the Union journal urged members to "support the Building Unions' May Queen Candidate".[19] It seems likely that this was the last year that a May Queen candidate was supported. Jack Mundey cannot remember discussing on the Executive or at Branch meetings whether to continue the practice of supporting May Queens. Bud Cook believes that there was discussion at about this time but that "we went along with the other building unions". At one stage "we put it to Kerry McMurray [B.L.F. office worker] to be our candidate and she said 'why should we put up anyone as a May Day Queen?'". This correlates with Mundey's belief that it was pressure from the women's movement rather than thinking from within the Union that produced the eventual atmosphere "where it just seemed inappropriate; there was no conscious discussion or decision".[20]

The male builders labourers' relations with the female clerical staff was a relatively close and successful one during the early and mid sixties.[21] This was mainly because of the smallness of the Union, leading to closer personal relationships,[22] and the fact that both male organisers and female clerical staff had started afresh in 1961 as "raw young things" learning the ropes together;[23] but probably most importantly because the female staff accepted their position as women and, untouched by feminism, did not question their role as tea-makers and male support-systems. An indication of the males' attitudes to the staff is that in the Executive Minutes they are referred to as "girls"

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15 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 15 February 1966.
16 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 29 March 1966. The nurses were sticking to their sex-stereotyped profession and were therefore wholly admirable.
17 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 12 November 1968. There was a brief mention of a "strike at Holdsworthy over women cleaners" in Executive Meeting Minutes 16 May 1967 but nobody can remember what it was about or (more importantly) whose side they were on.
18 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 20 February 1968.
19 Builders Labourer, April 1969, p.3.
20 Interviews: Jack Mundey and Bud Cook, 30 March 1978.
21 Interview: Paula Rix, 25 January 1978.
22 Judy Mundey worked in the office from 1961 until she married Jack in 1965.
23 Interview: Judy Mundey, 13 March 1978.

without mention of their specific names even though a specific occurrence was referred to,[24] and when one "girl" was eventually identified she was only referred to by her first name.[25]

However, with the election of Jack Mundey as Secretary during 1968 and the first stirrings of feminism in Sydney and particularly within the Communist Party, things began to change. The impact on the Communist Party of the women's movement and other movements for personal liberation had become quite traumatic by the early seventies. Many C.P.A. women activists such as Mavis Robertson, Joyce Stevens, Aileen Beaver and Stella Nord began to campaign against sexism within the party itself. With the departure of the more puritanical, mostly older, male S.P.A. contingent in 1971, the Party found itself able ideologically to encompass views about personal lifestyle that would have been unthinkable earlier. In its policy statement for 1972, adopted at the Twenty Third Congress, the Party expressed its support for Women's Liberation, the "Youth Revolt" and homosexual rights.[26] By 1974 the Party adopted a major policy statement on "Women and Social Liberation"[27] which Caroline Graham refers to as "in every respect a revolutionary feminist manifesto".[28]

The influence of Party thinking on the male leadership of the Builders Labourers' Federation cannot be over-emphasised. Michelle Fraser, new recruit to both the C.P.A. and the B.L.F. in 1974 recalled that it was obvious to her that policies concerning women came through the building branch of the C.P.A. and were a direct result of the struggle that the C.P.A. women had encountered with their own "left-wing" males.[29] However, the new Party thinking on such matters always had more support from the younger members and party intellectuals than it did from their trade union wing. In this context it makes the efforts of Jack Mundey, Joe Owens, Tom Hogan and the other B.L.F. organisers an even greater leap into the unknown. None of the other Party trade union officials made similar "giant strides".

After the 1970 Margins strike, the B.L.F. began moving into a new phase of unionism which included the sort of gestures towards the women's movement to which an all-male union is restricted. "Wives and

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24 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 20 February 1968.
25 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 4 June 1968.
26 C.P.A. Document, The Left Challenge for the Seventies, Sydney, 1972.
27 C.P.A. Document, The Socialist Alternative, Sydney, 1974.
28 Caroline Graham, op.cit., p.15.
29 Interview: Michelle Fraser, 14 December 1977.

girl friends" began being invited to important General Meetings and to strike meetings.[30] Pete Thomas estimates that "about a fifth of the attendance were wives" at the Branch meeting held after the 1970 strike.[31] Substantial support was organised for the Canberra nurses' strike including several stoppages[32] and a donation was made to the nurses of $200 from the Union, with additional collections organised on building sites. Wives of B.L.F. and B.W.I.U. members invaded the offices of the M.B.A. during the 1971 strike and ten of them made up a deputation to see the M.B.A. Executive officers".[33]

Such actions, however, were still within the traditional realms of a woman's role in trade union activity. It was in March 1971 that the Union became involved in a full scale campaign to change the women's role to genuine participation. The first occasion happened almost accidentally in early 1971. A subcontractor on the Kingsgate building project hired four women to do cleaning work, claiming the "girls" were more suited to this work than men. Mick Ross, the job delegate reported:

> Workers on the site had no argument with this but insisted that any girls would have to become members of the Builders Labourers and as such receive the same wages and conditions.34

The subcontractor tried to persuade the women that they would be better off if they joined another union. The women refused and joined the B.L.F. Later, when the subcontractor whent broke and the women's wages were not paid the men on the job organised several stop work meetings and eventually a strike to guarantee the women's wages and security of employment.

The points that must be made about this ready acceptance of the women by the job-site are firstly that they were there, doing B.L.'s work to begin with and were not seen to be forced on to the job as a political gesture by the leadership. Secondly, they were not politically conscious or aggressively feminist women and obviously enjoyed good personal relationships with the men on the job. They were seen as young innocents being helped to a better understanding of unionism and

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30 Minutes: General Meetings, 9 June 1970; 1 December 1970; Executive Meeting, 30 March 1971. The women present at the first such meeting (June 1970) were invited to "comment on what they felt about strikes and add their ideas".

31 Pete Thomas, Taming the Concrete Jungle, p.70.

32 Minutes: Executive Meetings, 25 June 1970; 29 June 1970, and 14 July 1970.

33 Sydney Morning Herald, 8 May 1971.

34 Builders' Labourer (April 1971, p.11) reports on the incident in detail.

subcontractor's tricks by the worldly wise and benificent male members: "The birds who had landed on Kingsgate soon learned that subcontractors could fly too, but they could fly by night".[35] Thirdly, they were suitably grateful to their benefactors and the anticipated client relationship was established, "...the men treat us very well. They're very good and considerate to us".[36] Fourthly, they were engaged in cleaning work which is a much less male-sex-stereotyped role than general labouring. Fifthly, the fact that Mick Ross was the job delegate was an important factor. Often the way women were accepted on job sites was a direct result of the consciousness-raising efforts of particular delegates or job militants. Mick Ross was an old time C.P.A. member and a true gentleman in the nicest sense. His ideological commitment to equality and his standing amongst the other workers would have had considerable impact. Finally, however, it is important to note that the actual strike occurred over basic trade union issues (i.e. non-payment of workers) rather than over the issue of women directly.

This incident received much publicity within the industry and in March it was suggested by Brian Hogan that the four women be given an invitation to the April Delegates Meeting.[37] Although the four women came to meetings and joined in other activities none of them became involved in the "women in the industry" campaign and only Kathy Valamis remained a B.L. The stage had been set, however, for other women to enter the building industry.

Later in the year, Marjorie Olive started working at "Crosstowns" and reported:

> The boss tried to sack me after I had been there only five minutes. When the delegate asked him why he said, "But it's a girl, it's a girl" (I emphasise the "it's"). But I was forced upon them and they are stuck with me.38

Olive's friend Glenys Page became interested in working as a B.L. and Olive got her a job by the simple procedure of turning up on a V.H.Y. job at Randwick with four women instead of three, and informing the boss that he had an extra worker. Page reports that they had little trouble being accepted in that job (they were still working as cleaners) except for one foreman. Bob Pringle came out to the site and arranged a compromise with the troublesome foreman.[39]

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35 Ibid.
36 Karlene Slattery, Builders' Labourer, April 1971, p.12.
37 Minutes: Executive Meeting, 16 March 1971.
38 Builders' Labourer 1972, p.7.
39 Interview: Glenys Page, 24 January 1978.

As the subcontractor moved the women from job to job they received some odd responses. One forman complained that "I can't really demand what they should do in plain language...I just don't know how to talk to the girls" and another said "I don't know what my wife will say when she hears that I have a couple of girls working for me on the job". He added that he thought the "girls" would distract his men from working. Glenys Page was not allowed to work on the external staging of the top floor of Kingsgate even though she had been willing.[40] This protectionist attitude towards the women on the part of both the bosses and labourers was one which had to be fought hard. While the women could be seen to be "protected" from certain work it was harder to argue their equal rights to employment opportunity.

By the end of 1971 the B.L.F. was able to boast of nine female members.[41] Glenys Page believes their relative acceptance by the rank and file was because they were seen as oddities or abberations.[42] They were not yet seen as a real threat to the male enclave. The "oddities" were becoming more numerous and in 1972 several strikes occurred to force bosses to accept female labour.[43]

In these confrontations the employers' objections were couched in terms of a threat to management prerogative; an objection to anything that smacked of "workers' control" or "union hire". Karlene Slattery's job as a "nipper"[44] on an office building in North Sydney caused a fourteen day stoppage. The job delegate had arranged with the foreman for a nipper to be taken on but when Slattery arrived on the job she was told she could not start. Her name had been on the top of an unemployed list in the Union office, not because she was a woman but because she had been unemployed for two and a half months. The workers were striking as much over their right to "union hire" as over the right for a woman to work. Even the company spokesman denied the dispute was over the employment of a "girl". He denied that they had agreed to employ a nipper. The employer, James Wallace Pty Ltd, maintained "the right to put on its own staff".[45] However, the employer would not have objected

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40 Sun-Herald, 19 December 1971.
41 Builders' Labourer, 1972, p.7.
42 Interview: Glenys Page, 24 January 1978.
43 Other women who joined the industry in 1972, but without employer resistence were Carol McNaughton, the wife of an organiser, Denise Bishop, later to be elected to the Executive and Stella Nord who had previously worked in the Union office.
44 A nipper gets the lunches, cleans the change rooms, boils the billy and generally looks after amenities on the site.
45 Sun, 23 May 1972.

if a male nipper had arrived on the job, and the men knew that, so in effect, the women's rights issue had become, as it so often did later, inextricably wedded to the job-control issue.

In September 1972 a similar job-control/women's rights situation occurred when Glenys Page was sent by the Union to be the nipper on an E.A. Watts job in North Sydney. The company's original objection was that the position was being kept for a one-armed man[46] but when brought before the industrial board, they claimed they were not in a position to employ a nipper at that time, even though they had advertised for one.[47] Page analyses the situation:

> ...they [Watts] wanted to employ their own labour - they didn't want to be told who to employ or who not to employ. Because I was a woman it meant changes they did not particularly want to make.

The employer ordered her off the site and she was escorted from the job by the police, who had tried to harass her (unsuccessfully) into not returning to the site once they realised they could not charge her because she was a minor. Workers from her job and other jobs in the area stopped work and went down to support her at the police station. The next day the job was closed and a two week lock-out ensued. Bans occurred on other E.A. Watts jobs during this period. The Union successfully argued in court that she was being denied employment merely because of her sex, and eventually she started work on the job where she remained for two years.[48]

A short time later, Carmen Rose, a Maltese woman married to a builders labourer was sacked from a Lend Lease job in Kogarah for, amongst other things, refusing to work with non-unionists. B.Ls at other Lend Lease jobs stopped work in solidarity and she was re-instated.[49] In November a dispute occurred over a female nipper in Newcastle. The employing company took out a summons to prevent June Philpott being on the Civic Centre site "without reasonable cause". The Union took the matter to the industrial court but kept Philpott off the site because she would have been arrested.[50]

Another confrontation occurred when Wendy Stringer applied for a

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46 Interview: Glenys Page, 24 January 1978. Now it's "woman as cripple".
47 Daily Telegraph, 10 November 1972.
48 Interview: Glenys Page, 24 January 1978.
49 Pete Thomas, Taming the Concrete Jungle, p.73. Once again a traditional union issue (scabbing) was inextricably linked with the women's issue.
50 Newcastle Morning Herald, 6 November 1972; 11 November 1972; and 14 November 1972.

job as a safety officer at a Crow Industries job at Hoxton Park. Although she had not applied through the Union office, she was qualified for the job so the men on the site decided to "work her in". As she describes it, "...we were working in mud so we had to wear gumboots and as I'm more shortlegged than anyone else the mud used to run into them". Eventually the mud issue (site allowance) and the woman issue became intertwined and after the "work-in" had lasted for a week the job went on strike because the labourers were sacked for working her in. The strike lasted sixteen weeks and Stringer became involved in collecting strike levies from other city jobs and began attending Union meetings. Although the entire gang of labourers (about fifteen) were never allowed to return to the site, the confrontation had an amusing finale. The boss, convinced he had finally rid himself of the dreadful Stringer, hired a new gang which happened to contain, totally by coincidence, Stringer's twin sister Robyn Williams. The boss refused to believe she was not Stringer so both of them had to turn up on the site to prove there were in fact two of them.[51]

The next job Stringer applied for turned out almost as disastrously. The subcontractor who had hired her was told to fire her. He refused and was fired himself. Then the man who hired him got fired and after a bewildering series of events in which Stringer won her case in the courts three times, she was eventually kept on at the site.[52] When Williams applied for her next job she was only accepted when the Union leadership told the employer he had to have her or he would not have a job at all.

The fact that Wendy Stringer and Robyn Williams had applied for jobs in the outer western suburbs without specific Union backing was indicative of the way the Union was being identified with the women's struggle. Many of the previous incidents had received press publicity and it was becoming widely known that builders labouring was a new option open to women with a taste for outdoor life.[53]

Unfortunately virtually all the media coverage of these serious "women's rights" strikes was sexist almost to the extent of becoming soft-core porn. The women were invariably photographed in alluring positions and were inevitably "attractive", "pert", "bright-eyed" and

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51 Interview: Wendy Stringer, 5 March 1978.
52 Interview: Robyn Williams, 20 April 1978.
53 Many of the women gave as their reason for becoming labourers: "I didn't want to be cooped up in an office".

were normally asked whether they had burnt their bras. Trivia were always dwelt upon in detail such as "Joan Cox recently caused a storm when she was refused the daily beer ration given to men when she was working on a brewery site" or "hard work won't ruin a woman's looks or figure, said Mrs Denise Bishop". The serious industrial issues involved in some of the disputes were mostly ignored by the press.[54]

Presumably these news stories moulded to some extent the expectations of the male builders labourers who found themselves quite unprepared for the new wave of feminists who started entering the industry during 1973. In June 1973, seventeen women enrolled for a hoist drivers' course at Sydney Technical College. When two women had first asked about it they were told that a class would only be held if they could get ten enrolments. It ended up being necessary to have two classes formed, such was the response from interested women.[55]

In mid 1973 Janne Reed, an outspoken working class feminist from Wollongong with extensive union experience, applied for a nipper's job on the North Shore Hospital site:

> When I went for the job, there'd just been a six week strike over grievances including the right to have a nipper. So when I rolled up as a woman, the company, instead of saying "we won't employ a woman, we'll put a man on instead", just said "no job". I think if they'd just said "no woman", the men whose consciousness was not very good at the time would have just copped it.56

However, a stop work meeting was immediately called which Reed attended and after more approaches were made to the company, a "work-in" and later a strike were declared. By then the issue had become a women's issue and Reed believes about 90% of the men were prepared to support it on those grounds, "...they were very good - the old boilermakers were really brilliant". The boss threatened to call the police and have her arrested. "I said 'I've been arrested by experts who do you think you are?' The men on the job stood and cheered."[57] Eventually the dispute was resolved in her favour[58] and Reed became actively involved both on the job (she was elected delegate) and within the Union itself.

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54 Good examples of such coverage are Daily Telegraph, 10 November 1972; Sun-Herald, 19 December 1971; Sun-Herald, 23 May 1972.

55 Pete Thomas, Taming the Concrete Jungle, p.73.

56 Interview: Janne Reed, 18 April 1978.

57 Ibid.

58 This is a fairly typical example of the way the men became involved during an actual dispute. Women in the abstract might be disapproved of but once the men met the actual woman, heard her arguments, and saw the employer discriminate against her, they became more accepting and often supportive.

Another woman, later to become prominent in the Union, Lyn Syme, entered the industry at the end of 1973. She says the men on her job suspected that a woman was going to turn up as their new hoist driver, because the area organiser Tony Hadfield had insisted that the company hire a ticketed hoist driver and that the Union would have one on the job by Monday. She describes the men's reactions as "quite good really".[59] She recalls that by the time the boss turned up she had been there working the hoist for three or four hours, "...he freaked at first, but I was there, I'd met everybody - there was nothing he could do".[60]

By 1974 women were flooding into the Union. Jack Mundey announced during the year that the Union now had 80 female members although it seems unlikely that even at its height there were ever more than 20 women actually working at any one time. Some jobs ended up with three or four women on them,[61] including Crystals at Surry Hills, Dillinghams at Clarence Street and Canns, an extension to a bridal salon in Market Street. This latter job provided some amusing sidelights. Rhonda Ellis tells a story,

> ...we spent time trying to communicate with women in the lifts on their way up to buy bridal gowns. Picture Lesley (Mason) and I in our overalls and big boots, wearing our helmets and not looking at all like them...We'd tell them how good our wages and conditions were and face them with an alternative to getting married and being the suburban dream. I don't know whether we actually won any but they certainly used to look at us.62

Women were still being regularly refused work by employers however. When Michelle Fraser applied for a job in Glebe she was "just laughed at". When she returned to the site with a B.L.F. organiser who happened to be Lyn Syme, the boss became intimidated[63] and under pressure from the men on the job, eventually capitulated. He actually offered Fraser "a month's pay to leave him alone".[64] When I asked Michelle Fraser if there had ever actually been a strike to get her onto the job she replied "Only on Dillinghams [Clarence Street] but they were constantly on strike. I don't know whether they were on strike over me or something else". The boss refused to employ her (she had been sent down by the

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59 Possibly the men were more accepting because Hadfield had just succeeded in achieving proper pay-rates for the labourers on the job so the Union was in good standing with them at the time.

60 Interview: Lyn Syme, 20 April 1978.

61 The fact that de facto "union hire" could only be implemented on already militant jobs meant that women could only be forced on to certain sites by the Union - hence their congregation on specific jobs.

62 Interview: Rhonda Ellis, 5 August 1977.

63 Like most B.L.F. organisers, Syme had a forceful personality.

64 Interview: Michelle Fraser, 14 December 1977.

union for a day's relief work) and the workers said "hang around we've got a strike meeting on". She said the experience of being on a militant site was very exciting - she never actually got to do any work but at the end of the day her pay was waiting for her.[65]

Another big dispute had a new twist. Ros Harrison, a doctor, was refused a job as first aid officer on an Eastments site, and the company appointed a less qualified male instead. The usual wrangle occurred with the company denying that Harrison was being turned down because she was a woman.[66] After a month's strike a strange compromise was reached whereby she was to begin work as a labourer and was to relieve the first aid officer when he was off duty.

Dillinghams was the focus of the biggest dispute over women in 1974. This occurred when a D.L.I. inspector approved the labourers' demands for a safety officer who duly arrived on site but was refused employment because she was a woman (Philippa Pieters). The men decided to work her in but the following day the police were called and the builders labourers ordered off the site under threat of arrest. A three week strike ensued.[67] It was the first time that the women's movement became actively involved in a building site dispute. Demonstrations were organised against Dillinghams and the Master Builders' Association by the B.L.F. women's collective and the Dillingham workers. Women's Liberation groups, Women's Electoral Lobby, Women's Trade Union Action and public service women were represented at the demonstrations.[68] An article attacking Dillinghams appeared in the women's movement paper Mabel[69] and a leaflet was produced by the B.L.F. Women's Collective.[70] Eventually the strike was won and Philippa Pieters remained on the job.

It was only in 1974 that the B.L. women's collective was properly formed although it had always existed in an informal way as "the coming together of women B.Ls to chat about common problems". In 1973 they had produced a Questions and Answers document which attacked most of the more common (and ludicrous) arguments against women in the industry. However, when the collective became more formalised, the male leadership felt particularly threatened and claimed the women were "working as a clique".[71] As this was considered in opposition to the official Union

65 Ibid.
66 Sydney Morning Herald, 20 June 1974.
67 B.L.F. Document, Dillingham Clarence St Dispute, n.d., 2pp. roneod.
68 Helmet, March 1974.
69 Mabel, No. 2, n.d.
70 B.L.F. Document, Support the Right of Women to Work.
71 Interview: Rhonda Ellis, 5 August 1977.

policy of "openness at all levels" the women were "heavily pressurised" by the males to "expand" (or as the women put it "disband") the collective. The women agreed and the collective turned into an anti-discrimination or right-to-work group. Two males came to the first open meeting and then no more. By this time Intervention was heavily involving the Union and "it never functioned as an anti-discrimination group or again as a women's collective".[72]

The women who worked as builders labourers could be classified roughly into two groups. The first was mostly working class, those who took the job because it was good money or they wanted to work outdoors. Some of this group, such as Glenys Page and Denise Bishop, became politicised by their experience and later actively involved. The second group was more politically aware and became involved because they were inspired by what the Union was doing in other areas and wanted to be part of such an exciting atmosphere. This group was never very large and few of them, although good feminists, saw their act in a purely feminist perspective. Their feminism was probably emphasised by the sexist situations they encountered. Many of the women stayed long periods on their various jobs. Stints of from six months to three years were quite common.[73] There are several reasons for this. One is that once having won the battle to get on to a job they felt less inclined to leave. Secondly, women are generally a more stable work force and finally, as banner holders for women in the industry perhaps they tried extra hard not to get sacked for minor misdemeanours.

Leadership support for women in the industry was shown in many ways. They actively encouraged women to take official Union positions. Denise Bishop was preselected by the Rank and File Committee[74] to stand for the Executive in 1973 at the instigation of the leadership. Many of the posters advertising the Owens-Pringle-Mundey team featured large pictures of Denise Bishop with slogans like "Vote for a Woman". As a result of extensive campaigning during that election[75] Bishop actually topped the ballot. She was also appointed a temporary organiser as were

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72 Interview: Michelle Fraser, 14 December 1977. All the women were adamant however that their experience in the B.Ls had been rewarding and mentioned such things as "gaining a class perspective", "realising the power of unified workers" and "being able to participate in a near-perfect democracy".

73 These are long periods for an industry in which the B.L. turnover is estimated to be 50% per year.

74 The leadership supporters.

75 Interview: Don Crotty, 13 March 1978.

Lyn Syme and Rhonda Ellis in 1974.

Even if these appointments were "token" in a certain sense, the tokenism was allayed by the activity of the women themselves. Contrary to the normally discouraging effect of trade union bureaucracies which reinforce a woman's feeling of powerlessness,[76] the Union actually encouraged all members, including women, to participate in all decisions and activities. The women reponded dramatically and the percentage of activists amongst the female members of the Union was far higher than amongst the males.

There were many other examples of leadership support for the women's movement. Articles about women's issues were regularly featured from 1971 in the Builders' Labourer and the Rank and File Rag including advertisements for women's day marches, the women's unemployment centre, abortion demonstrations and so on. The December 1973 Builders' Labourer had a picture of Denise Bishop being arrested at the Rocks on the cover.

The 1973 "Rank and File" election policy statement demanded:

> ...not only the right of women to work as builders labourers but giving maximum assistance to women's struggles for complete political and social liberation in our society.77

The N.S.W. Branch's agenda items for the 1973 Federal Conference called on each state to "take immediate action to establish the rights of women to work in the industry".[78] By 1974 their log of claims for Federal Conference included (somewhat hopefully) abortion leave as well as paternity and maternity leave.[79]

The Union's support for the women's movement was forthcoming in many different ways. Caroline Graham describes how W.E.L. approached the B.L.F. for help in raising funds for an abortion advertisement.

> The response was typically generous: not only did we receive a large cash donation, but the union president Bob Pringle, helped our representative to compose and lay out the advertisement.80

The leadership often marched on International Women's Day, sometimes to the accompaniment of ribald remarks from labourers high on the

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76 Described in American studies; Barbara Wertheimer and Anne Nelson, Trade Union Women: A Study of their Participation in New York City Locals; Kirsten Amundsen, The Silenced Majority; and Janice Madden, The Economics of Sex Discrimination.

77 Builders' Labourer, August 1973.

78 B.L.F. Document, NSW Agenda Items for Federal Conference 1973.

79 Tribune, 1 October 1974. As Jack Mundey points out, he still does not know whether the N.S.W. items were actually discussed because they were not allowed to attend the meeting, having been expelled by then.

80 Caroline Graham, op.cit., p.2.

city building sites. They supported the Kings Cross strippers' strike in 1973 and personally appeared at some of the support demonstrations.[81] In June 1973 they placed a green ban on Sydney University in support of a women's studies course in the Philosophy Department.[82] They were also active in support of Penny Short who had her teachers college scholarship withdrawn because she was a lesbian. It was the bans involving homosexual rights that found the least acceptance from the membership. Often in interviews, male builders labourers would tell me that they totally agreed with the green bans "except for that one about homosexuals". Bob Pringle felt that the debate at the meeting which endorsed the Jeremy Fisher ban "was more about the dictatorial attitude of the master of the College rather than the actual issue of homosexuality". He believed that the labourers, "like society generally, were not sufficiently radicalised on issues of sexual oppression".[83]

Leadership attempts to educate the rank and file on the issue of sexism were obviously successful to some extent as illustrated by the many job-site actions which took place in support of women's rights. But some female builders labourers believed that certain officials lacked the desire to "go down and fight it out on the job"; an attitude which characterised the leadership's struggles over other issues, the green bans for instance. This soft pedalling may have been a desire not to push too heavily a somewhat unpopular issue or it could have stemmed from the lingering sexism of some of the officials. There was, as an anonymous female B.L. stated, "a doubt whether the verbal support of some organisers is genuine".[84]

Wendy Stringer admitted there were "those officials who genuinely were concerned about women's rights but there were others who only supported women because it was a popular wave".[85] Denise Bishop interpreted her original preselection as: "they wanted to say 'look how we're treating women as equals - this is a free thinking Union and it gives the Union a better image'".[86] She actually believed that her unique position as Australia's first female building union official was much more difficult for the men to handle than it was for her. Stella Nord

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81 An act not greatly appreciated at Trades Hall.
82 The Union also banned further building work at Macquarie University in support of an expelled homosexual student, Jeremy Fisher.
83 Gay Liberation Press, No. 3, September, 1974.
84 Tribune, 1 October 1974.
85 Interview: Wendy Stringer, 5 March 1978.
86 Interview: Denise Bishop, 11 March 1978.

thinks that the Union's policy on women

> ...actually forced some of the officials to declare themselves, in the sense that they were either for it or against it, and those who were for it, they went out onto meetings and actually promoted the idea of women in the industry and encouraged strikes, as against some others who while they said they supported it would not have been so active.87

Whilst the female B.Ls remained quiet and grateful, the leadership's real feelings were obscured. It was when the women began speaking out and demanding conditions and rights relevant to women that the males began to feel threatened. Lyn Syme believes that she, as an outspoken activist, was resented. She says that the male right always to be the speaker was under attack.[88] Wendy Bacon believes that Janne Reed was especially resented because she saw herself as an industrial equal.[89] Reed believes she was resented more for being a feminist than for being a woman and because a lot of the men only knew about her feminist background and not about her previous Union activities.

These "shameless hussies" who dared to pull the men up in the pub for their sexist language were very different to the early female labourers; or to the women from the Resident Action Groups who were cast inevitably into the grateful client status by their dependence on the green bans.

Much of the leadership's supposed sexism was in fact a product of their male ideas about leadership and hierarchy. They felt that the women's attack on leadership was almost an attack on them personally. The women promoted discussion about collectivist forms of leadership and non-hierarchical structures. Lyn Syme believes the men felt menaced because ideas like collectivism would threaten <u>their</u> positions. The ones whom she felt might have understood the feminist arguments "in their strange way" were the two anarchist organisers, Tony Hadfield and Dean Barber.[90] As it was, the women and their supporters were frequently characterised as anarchists. Michelle Fraser says "we weren't calling ourselves anarchists, everybody else was calling us anarchists or Left Tendency.[91] Jack Mundey said to me and Tommy [Hogan] that we must be living on the wrong side of Glebe Point Road".[92]

Probably also the leadership who (correctly) considered themselves

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87 Interview: Stella Nord, 13 March 1978.
88 Interview: Lyn Syme, 20 April 1978.
89 Interview: Wendy Bacon, 22 April 1978.
90 Interview: Lyn Syme, 20 April 1978.
91 A grouping within the C.P.A. at the time.
92 Interview: Michelle Fraser, 14 December 1977.

to be the harbingers and leading proponents of true democracy in the trade union movement felt almost insulted that their position as arbiters of what was democracy was being questioned, by the even more democratic feminist ideas. It was the women who saw and understood best the informal power structures within the Union. Some referred to "charisma overriding collective decision making"[93] and others to "pecking orders"[94] and "power positions".[95] They agreed that some men such as Tony O'Beirne and Tom Hogan saw the practical applications of feminist ideas about personal power "probably for the first time". It is interesting to note that only the women, out of the 46 builders labourers interviewed, properly understood my questions about informal or personal power.[96]

The male leadership obviously distinguished very clearly between the female B.Ls and the female office staff. The clerks believed they were considered inferior, not only because they were women but because they were not part of the builders labourers camaraderie.[97] Pat Fiske tells an enlightening story. During Intervention she used to return to the Union rooms each afterooon where male officials would clap her on the shoulder and say "goodday". One day she was helping with the typing and she reports "not a soul said hullo, not a male even noticed I was there".[98] Even the women builders labourers were occasionally guilty of this distinction. During the office strike in 1974 none of the female labourers came to talk to the clerks about the issue.

The clerks emphasise that there was much confusion in the minds of the males about what exactly the female clerks' role was. Were they clerks or were they B.Ls? They were often meant to behave like B.Ls and put the Union's interests before their own discomforts, but they were only paid as clerks. The men did not like having it pointed out to them that the women were paid much less "even though we're highly

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93 Interview: Rhonda Ellis, 5 August 1977.

94 Merton discusses the "complicated social ritual which symbolizes and supports the pecking order of the various offices", in Robert K. Merton, "Bureaucratic Structure and Personality", in Amitai Etzioni (ed.), Complex Organisations.

95 Interviews: Michelle Fraser, 14 December 1977; and Paula Rix, 25 January 1978.

96 Joreen, ("The Tyranny of Structurelessness", The Second Wave, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1972) comments: "The inevitably elitist and exclusive nature of informal communication networks is [not] a phenomenon new to women. Such informal relationships have excluded women for centuries from participating in integrated groups of which they were a part".

97 Interviews: Robyn Cockayne, Carol Kalafates, Paula Rix and Jenny Healey, 25 January 1978.

98 Interview: Pat Fiske, 2 March 1978.

trained and you aren't". Even when a woman took over as office co-ordinator she was only paid a "responsibility" allowance even though the male preceding her had received an organiser's wage. When Jenny Healey took over as temporary co-ordinator she received just what all the women got, the clerks award plus $10 for "discomforts". The Union did however cut out the iniquitous junior and senior distinctions.[99] Paula Rix, comments on this aspect:

> They were giving things on their terms, they were the great benefactors, they had been good enough to be the icebreakers on these questions like feminism and it [the office strike of 1974](100) was like the dog biting the hand that feeds it.

She added that the men certainly resented the female clerks' personal political activity and saw it as affecting their devotion to the B.L.F. cause. "They couldn't countenance a political imagination amongst the women."[101] When the female clerks, inspired by self-management ideas coming through from the Union, decided to reorganise their office lives by rotating co-ordinators, sharing boring tasks and so on, the officials did not take kindly to the changes.

Perhaps in the sense that "no man is a hero to his valet" it was the clerks, the people closest to them who saw them at their worst, or as Joe Owens puts it "we were so unselfish in some ways and so selfish in others, like in our personal relationships".[102]

The officials' discomfort about the actions of the politicised women can be traced to the sort of paranoia that Michels describes when he talks about the "for us or against us" syndrome. Under attack from all quarters, the leadership saw incidents such as the office strike and even the forming of the B.L.F. women's collective as a "disloyalty".

Some of the males now admit they made many mistakes with the way they treated the women in the office. Joe Owens says "when it came to the crunch we acted like bosses".[103]

The leadership's own problems about feminism were not only mirrored by the membership but magnified. Many rank and filers were not

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99 Interviews: Robyn Cockayne, Carol Kalafates, Paula Rix and Jenny Healey, 25 January 1978.

100 The strike occurred in late 1974 over absorption of an award increase. It was amicably settled.

101 Interview: Paula Rix, 25 January 1978.

102 Interview: Joe Owens, 24 January 1978.

103 Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978. Despite obvious occasions of strained relations the women remained intensely loyal to the Union and, like the female B.Ls, felt that they had participated in an interesting and exciting period.

ideologically committed to female equality in the first place. Michelle Fraser believes however that on the job level, "where there was support for you, it was much more genuine or they wouldn't have accepted you at all".[104]

The main reason that rank and file sexism was hard to overcome was because in a rugged and largely unskilled industry, the males invest their ego (in varying degrees) in their raw strength and not in their skill or managerial ability and so on. The very great danger of working as a builders labourer is a particularly macho feature of the industry. The labourers' physical strength and their ability to face danger were the means by which these men measured their superiority over women.[105] Whereas male academics or students have at some time had to acknowledge that a woman has beaten them in an examination or written a better book, these labourers had never had to pit their strength and daring against women. Hence women coming into their industry represented a much greater threat to their self-image than would have been the case in a less rugged industry.

Stella Nord, points out that this ego-investment also applies to mining and other heavy, dangerous work:

> It contributes to their sense of maleness. They even regard themselves as superior to other men who are not working in that kind of industry. So think how much higher they would regard themselves compared to women.

She relates an incident where a labourer came in and saw her driving a hoist:

> He said "Jesus Christ what's this?" as though I'd come from another planet. I said "What's wrong, haven't you ever seen women doing this before?" "No, it makes me feel so inadequate, it makes me feel as if my job is not what I think it is - sheilas can do the work I'm doing!" I thought, "If ever there was somebody truthful! At least he's truthful!"106

Jack Mundey had pointed to the same phenomenon some years earlier:

> I do think that Women's Lib. brings extra pressures to bear on men and they do feel threatened in a way; especially the industrial working man (107) even if he doesn't verbalise his feelings.108

Given the "threat" potential of the women labourers and the resulting

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104 Interview: Michelle Fraser, 14 December 1977.

105 A. Tolson, The Limits of Masculinity, London, 1977, discusses this area.

106 Interview: Stella Nord, 13 March 1978.

107 Bob Pringle often argues that the reason working class men are so sexist is because capitalism oppresses them and the only person lower on the scale is their wife who "cops the lot".

108 Interview, Cleo, January 1974.

hostility of the rank and file it was, as Joe Owens observed:

> a good thing that many of the women involved in the Builders Labourers' Federation were politically aware to begin with, they needed to be political women to overcome the male chauvinism of the industry or to even survive.109

Even though the nature of the industry and the men's own backgrounds militated against acceptance of the women by the male labourers it is amazing the extent to which leadership ideology had permeated. All the women recounted individual acts of kindness and support; men who taught them how to lift things, strip wood, use jackhammers etc.; and men who argued with their fellow B.Ls in their support. And of course the strikes and "work ins" that occurred against employer discrimination were a true indication of the genuinely egalitarian atmosphere that the Union engendered.

The women were accepted in many different ways: sometimes as "some sort of a joke",[110] sometimes as "what's-a-nice-girl-like-you-doing-in-a-place-like-this" and sometimes as "it-might-be-O.K.-for-you-but-not-for-my-wife".[111]

> As women show they are capable of doing their job, attitudes change but usually the men assume that this one woman with whom they are working is "different".112

Lyn Syme remembered "it was a bit like becoming one of the boys in a really despiseable way".[113] Most women mentioned wolf whistling and sexual comments, particularly on the bigger jobs, as a usual reaction. Stella Nord describes men attacking women in the industry "behind your back, never to your face" but she used to argue it out with them "boots and all".[114] Other male comments included "this is no place for a woman you should be home", "you're a bunch of bloody lesbians" and numerous remarks ridiculing women's liberation. Some men reacted by swearing excessively to shock the women,[115] others apoligised for swearing in front of them.[116] Others became disgusted when the women themselves swore.[117]

The mistakes of one woman tended to be generalised and all women

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109 Interview: Joe Owens, 4 April 1978.
110 Interview: Rhonda Ellis, 5 August 1977.
111 Interview: Lyn Syme, 20 April 1978.
112 Tribune, 1 October 1974.
113 Interview: Lyn Syme, 20 April 1978.
114 Interview: Stella Nord, 13 March 1978.
115 Interview: Robyn Williams, 20 April 1978.
116 Interview: Denise Bishop, 11 March 1978.
117 Interview: Pat Fiske, 2 March 1978.

were blamed.[118] Most women also reported a feeling of being tested:

> They'd tell you to do something and if you couldn't do it, it was because you were a woman; not because no one had ever shown you, evidently the men had been born knowing how to do it.[119]

Another reaction was an assumption that "because I was a woman I wasn't going to be pulling my weight and that they'd have to do the extra work".[120] When they discovered some of the women could use a shovel and so on they were pleasantly surprised and "treated them differently". Some women even felt that after a while the other labourers "didn't even notice I wasn't a man".[121]

"Person to person contact" and "forcing the men to look at your individual position" were considered important[122] and small job-sites were obviously best for this. "You could get to them and talk to them better."[123] However, the advantage of big jobs was that they were generally more militant and therefore supportive of leadership policy. The women felt that they had the Union behind them on these jobs. The disadvantage of being on big jobs was their sheer size. Both Janne Reed and Glenys Page reported a feeling of being "overwhelmed" by their jobs and also "a feeling of terrible isolation, having no one to speak to".[124] Lyn Syme believed that this stemmed from the men's inability to communicate with each other,[125] something which many of the women noticed and commented upon.

All found that it was easier to get through to the younger men[126] and quite surprisingly, to the migrants. This oppressed migrant/woman nexus was often mentioned casually during interviews. Despite efforts by the leadership, migrants were still discriminated against on many building sites and often this meant that it was the women (in the process of being "tested" by either the boss or the other labourers) and the migrants who ended up working together on the hardest jobs. Janne Reed reported that it was the migrants who realised quickest that she was

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118 Tribune, 1 October 1974.
119 Interview: Michelle Fraser, 14 December 1977.
120 Interview: Rhonda Ellis, 5 August 1977.
121 Interview: Robyn Williams, 20 April 1978. She reports that her acceptance on site was greatly improved after an incident where she was the only person with enough money to bail out a fellow labourer arrested for driving under the influence.
122 Interview: Janne Reed, 18 April 1978.
123 Interview: Pat Fiske, 2 March 1978.
124 Interview: Janne Reed, 18 April 1978.
125 Gay Liberation Press, No. 3, p.16.
126 Confirmed by Don Crotty (Interview: 13 March 1978) when describing reactions to his 1973 election speeches on women's rights.

being discriminated against work-wise because they were the ones also struggling on the big jackhammers.[127] They also understood discrimination as a general issue much better.[128] Stella Nord explains it in these terms:

> ...many migrants had come from Europe where their wives had worked ...they accepted women on a building site in the same way as they would in a factory. They did not have the deep-seated resentment like some of the older Australians did who had grown up in the tradition that the man was the breadwinner.[129]

Another factor would have been that the migrants did not see themselves as part of the great Australian macho B.L. image: they were merely working for the money and the women did not threaten their self-concept. Consequently migrants were also less insulted when confronted with a female organiser.[130]

One problem the women found was that they were being herded into sex-stereotyped roles such as nipper (cook), first aid officer (nurse) and cleaner (housewife). They constantly tried to depart from these roles and all agreed that men saw a very real distinction between women working in these positions and as a general labourer. For one thing in these female roles they were kept more physically apart from the other labourers. For another, these roles fitted the notion of "correct" work for women which many builders labourers possessed.

Although the women reported good experiences of acceptance with certain labourers and many were made delegates or co-delegates there were still the inevitable day to day arguments. The main argument was that the women were taking nippers' jobs from old B.Ls, who, having served the industry well, should enjoy the easy nippers' jobs in old age.[131] Stella Nord did a brief survey and discovered that it was hard to find a male nipper over 25. With the coming of multi-storey buildings, the nippers' job was no longer the easy one it used to be. When the women started to move into hoist drivers' positions they were still attacked for taking away the jobs of qualified men:"It wouldn't have mattered what we did, those opposed to women in the industry would have made an excuse about it".[132] Another complaint was that there were too many "political"

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127 Interview: Janne Reed, 18 April 1978.

128 In a similar vein it is interesting that Kevin Cook, the aboriginal B.L.F. organiser was often mentioned by the women as one of the most sympathetic.

129 Interview: Stella Nord, 13 March 1978.

130 Interview: Lyn Syme, 20 April 1978.

131 Janne Reed believes this argument was deliberately peddled by the opposition group ("Maoists") who were vehemently opposed to the idea of women in the industry.

132 Interview: Stella Nord, 13 March 1978.

women around:

> If you hadn't been involved they would have said you were only in it for the money, but when you were involved they felt you were moving in and taking over.[133]

The women also found they were sometimes resented because they knew more and were more politically aware. They claim that they were also resented for trying to "smarten up" safety conditions on jobs.[134] The women were not in fact over-represented as organisers but this was another attack sometimes made. As a percentage of the extremely active militants they were about proportionately represented. A few men saw the issue merely as a leadership stunt. Another argument that came up was that married women should not work in the industry and Denise Bishop, whose husband was also a builders labourer, claims that many men whose wives were not working or were earning a lot less than she was, resented the double B.L. wage aspect of her job. A final rationalisation was that "these women should get into industries where women were being persecuted".

The women believe that their acceptance as individuals depended on different factors. Showing an interest in the overall struggle of the workers was considered important. A working class background was considered a help[135] but a middle class one was not necessarily a hindrance. Sekai Holland found that her fellow labourers were suspicious about her motives for becoming a B.L. instead of finishing her law course but were quite understanding when they were convinced she really needed the money.[136] Janne Reed found that her working class background combined with the fact that she had "two kids to feed on her own" was decidedly in her favour when the men discussed it amongst themselves.[137] The key factor, however, seems to have been personality and the way women expressed their feminism.

Finally, the B.L.F. experience raised many questions within the women's movement about female participation in male dominated structures such as the trade union movement. This was an important development in itself. There had previously been among many feminists an unhealthy

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133 Ibid.
134 Interview: Rhonda Ellis, 5 August 1977. Sometimes a macho "lair factor" led male B.Ls to disregard basic safety precautions such as wearing helmets and not riding hooks.
135 Interview: Chris Melmuth, 16 January 1978 particularly stressed this aspect.
136 Sydney Morning Herald, 27 April 1974.
137 Interview: Janne Reed, 18 April 1978.

streak of anti-union feeling. Ros Harrison addressed herself to this aspect:

> You can't turn your back on the working class movement and say "Stuff it, it's male dominated" that just sets you apart on a little island in society rather than trying to bring about some very fundamental changes in that society.

Janne Reed added: "You realise that short of annihilating the whole male race what are you going to do?"[138]

The positive aspects of the female builders labourers' experience with an enlightened male union supported the views of those in the women's movement who believed that activism in trade unions was essential for feminists.

However the women's experience during Intervention probably confirmed for the pessimists the belief that conservative patriarchal trade unionism could not be altered. During Intervention many female labourers were sacked for refusing to accept "Gallagher" tickets. In fact the women featured prominently in the fight against takeover. Firstly, they knew that the Federal Branch would never support their right to work in the industry.[139] Secondly, they were highly politicised militants, often aligned with the C.P.A. and therefore opposed to Gallagher's industrial and political tactics. And thirdly, because of the support the state leadership had shown them over the years, they felt a great deal of respect and support in return.

Three women figure among the 25 members still refused tickets by Gallagher; all the others lost their jobs as a result of the invasion. Today there are no women working in the building industry.

Lyn Syme after reflecting upon the conservatism of the other unions in the building industry and on Australian male chauvinism in general concluded:

> I don't think it was a reality at any time, getting women accepted into that sort of industry.140

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138 Gay Liberation Press, No. 3, p.16.

139 For a good taste of what the Gallagher team intended for women here is what Les Robinson (Federally appointed state Secretary) had to say on the subject, "I wouldn't like it to become like Asian Countries where women work in the building industry - because it's hard work and I don't agree that women should come in and take the job that the old timer should have. I wouldn't like to see women in concrete - it's not sexism I just don't think they should be doing that sort of work." Interview: Les Robinson, 20 February 1978.

140 Interview: Lyn Syme, 20 April 1978.