The Women in Male Dominated Industries and Occupations Conference 2010 was held in Brisbane at the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) offices.

Conference delegates came from a wide range of male dominated industries including the energy, timber, mining, transport, vehicle, maritime, emergency services, meat, paint, metal and manufacturing sectors.

Participants held a variety of occupations including electricians, plumbers, police, butchers and meat process workers, boiler makers, rail workers, metal workers, transport drivers, vehicle and ship builders, miners, drag line operators, open cut examiners waterside workers and a number of apprentices.

The three-day Conference aimed to support women union members in male dominated occupations and industries and develop organising strategies in their workplaces and industries.

1. The program aimed to:

1. Provide an overview of the industrial and campaign goals for women unionists in 2010 and beyond;
2. Provide participants with information about the industrial and legal landscape;
3. Explore strategies to encourage and support women entering traditionally male careers;
4. Identify the key issues affecting women in male dominated workplaces;
5. Develop participants’ organising and campaigning skills;
6. Develop strategies to build women activist networks in their workplaces; and
7. Develop strategies to build the influence of women in unions.
2. **Industrial and campaign goals for women unionists in 2010 and beyond**

ACTU President, Ged Kearney, opened the conference by setting out the key industrial and campaign goals for women unionists this year. These included:

- Helping women balance work and family by improving the right to request flexible work arrangements, extending carer’s leave and bargaining to top up the new paid parental leave scheme;

- Improving women’s access to childcare, out of school hours care and respite care;

- Striving for pay equity for women, through the ASU equal pay case for social and community sector workers;

- Improving equal opportunity for women by lobbying for changes to anti-discrimination law and requiring employers to provide equal opportunities for men and women in their workplaces; and

- Improving women’s access to vocational education and training, skills development and trade apprenticeships.

3. **The industrial and legal landscape**

ACTU industrial officer Belinda Tkalcевич, spoke about the legislative opportunities for women with caring responsibilities under the Fair Work Act, including:

a. extending worker’s rights to request changes to work arrangements and carer’s leave to cover caring responsibilities for children, frail elderly and adult dependants with a disability;

b. providing a right for employees to appeal an employer’s unreasonable refusal of a request to change work arrangements to meet their caring responsibilities; and

c. extending the amount of carers leave.

Belinda outlined the ACTU’s strategy to improve paid parental leave in workplaces and the model clauses for unions to use when bargaining to improve work and family provisions in workplace agreements. The ACTU Work and Family kit will be posted on the WIMDOI face book page.

ASU Lead Organiser, Max Adlam, outlined the key aspects of the ASU pay equity case for social and community service sector workers. Over 80% of social and community service sector workers are women, working in women’s refuges, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, disability support, migrant and refugee services and community legal centres. These women are highly educated, skilled and experienced, and yet their skills are valued less because they are seen as innate ‘feminine’ skills of caring, supporting and nurturing, and because they work in poorly funded, not-for-profit sectors. Consequently they are paid considerably less than their male counterparts in traditional male jobs with similar qualifications, skills and experience. The ASU case will argue that these women’s work is undervalued, and as a result, underpaid, and that their minimum wages should be increased. The case will be heard by Fair Work Australia in early 2011.
4. Strategies to encourage and support women entering traditionally male careers

Queensland Minister for Community Services and Housing and Minister for Women, Karen Struthers, spoke about the importance of encouraging and supporting women and girls to consider and build careers in traditionally male dominated industries. The Queensland Office for Women’s ‘Women in Hard Hats Program’ provides information, resources and support for women and girls in non-traditional training, education and career opportunities.

Annie Cowling, from the Queensland Plumber’s Union, outlined the ‘Women in Plumbing Project’ which aims to encourage women and girls to enter the plumbing trade and support them on-site. As well as focusing on support and skills development for women plumbers, the Women in Plumbing Project ensures that male work colleagues are prepared and workplaces are appropriate to accommodate women plumbers.

CFMEU, Forestry and Furnishing Division National President, Jane Calvert, outlined the federal government funded ‘Moving Women into Forestry Project’ which enabled the union to conduct peer support meetings with women forestry workers to discuss career pathways and skills development and women’s participation in the timber industry. Jane emphasised the importance of asking people about their issues.

Workshop: Participants discussed strategies to encourage more women to enter non-traditional jobs including:

- Addressing workplace issues to make male dominated jobs more attractive for women to enter;
- Exploring government / tri-partite funded programmes to encourage women into non-traditional jobs;
- Supporting and sustaining women in male dominated occupations and industries through support structures for women who are / have entered non-traditional jobs; and
- Establishing regional WIMDOI support networks.

5. Identifying the key issues affecting women in male dominated workplaces

Workshop: Participants identified the following key issues for women in male dominated workplaces:

- Access to equal employment and career development opportunities such as apprenticeships, higher duties and on-the-job training;
- Access to decent workplace facilities such as toilets, change rooms and lockers;
- Representation within the union, including at executive level; and
- Elimination of discrimination and prejudice in the workplace.
6. Organising and campaigning skills

*Colleen Gibbs,* talked about her experiences as an AMWU shop-steward and forklift driver at Blackwell IXL Geelong, Victoria. Her story of organising women production line workers into the union highlighted the importance of listening to members, treating their issues seriously, gaining the support of male union members and involving union members at all stages of a workplace campaign.

Darren Goodwell of the Queensland Council of Unions discussed the importance of campaigning around the ‘value’ behind the ‘issue’. Darren outlined the key aspects of ‘values based campaigning’ including:

- Effective campaigns communicate values and use issues symbolically;
- ‘Values’ are the ‘anchor behind the campaign;
- People create ‘frames’ of what they think about issues based on their values;
- ‘Messages’ are critical to communicating the values behind the issue;
- A values based approach to campaigning identifies three step process to identify (1) values (think), (2) a frame (choose) and (3) a message (act).

Workshop: Participants identified the following industrial and campaign issues:

- equal access to training, experience, promotions and career progression; and
- bargain for work and family provisions for members.

Participants recognised the need to develop clear plans for industrial and campaign action.

7. Building women activist networks in the workplace

Workshop: Participants mapped their workplaces, discussed the critical role of delegates and strategies to support and develop them.

The mapping exercise highlighted that:

- there were key similarities across male dominated workplaces, including the concentration of women in administrative or support roles in workplaces and that they tended to be less unionised and/or organised; and
- Using the issue of overtime as an example, participants mapped the connection between higher levels of union density and organisation and better work pay and conditions.
Participants discussed the critical role of delegates in developing a union presence in the workplace. In particular, women in male dominated workplaces need access to delegates to help build a support network and become more engaged in their union. The following strategies were identified to build activist and delegates for women in male dominated workplaces:

- make contact with women in workplaces, particularly young women workers and apprentices;
- develop women’s support networks and / or committee structures in workplaces;
- provide women activists with information and education and specifically promote union education programs to women;
- encourage women to get involved in union activities; and
- provide ongoing support and exchange of information via the ACTU WIMDOI face book page and email list.

8. Building the influence of women in Unions

Amanda Richards, Assistant General Secretary of the Queensland Council of Unions, highlighted the importance of women members knowing their union rules and how to use them to advance women’s participation and influence within the union.

Belinda Tkalcevic reported on the preliminary findings of the ACTU Women in Unions Survey 2010. Women make up half of all workers, yet continue to earn 17.3% less than men which adds up to $1m less over a lifetime. Women make up almost half of all union members, yet 2/3 of senior union officials are men. Women are over-represented in (female dominated) industries which are low-paid and under-represented in (male dominated) industries which are high-paid. The survey aimed to find out what levels of influence women members and staff have in their union and what unions are doing to address the inequity. The survey results and proposed action plan will be reported to ACTU Executive in early 2011.

AMWU Training Adviser, Kate Perry outlined the union’s National Conference policy on organising women in their sector, recognising AMWU has only 9% women members despite considerably more working in industries the union covers. Consequently, the Queensland AMWU arranged a Conference designed to develop strategies to better organise women into the union. The Conference recommended the establishment of a women’s organising committee (which included male officials to reflect the decision that organising women into the union was not just women’s issues but every body in the union’s responsibility). The Women’s Organising Committee’s role included ensuring organisers identified potential women activists and prepared development plans to support and provide skills for those activists.
Workshop: Strategies to build the influence of women in unions included:

- Analysis of how the union works (including the union’s rules) and how to make a difference;
- Conference participants to raise awareness of WIMDOI/issues within the union;
- ‘Mainstream’ WIMDOI issues beyond ‘women’s issues’ to whole of union issues;
- Explore options to encourage women to take up leadership roles within their union;
- Establish a Women’s Organising Committee – dedicated to organising woman workers involving the whole union;
- Develop affirmative action strategies as a way of addressing a lack of representation of women in decision-making forums within unions;
- Explore options for establishing a Women’s Committee with representative at Union Executive level.

9. Summary of Key Conference Goals

Encouraging women and girls to enter traditionally male dominated careers

- Explore government / tri-partite funded programmes to encourage women into non-traditional jobs;
- Deal with industrial issues facing women in male dominated industries and occupations to make the career choice more attractive to women; and
- Establish sustainable support structures for women who are/ have entered non-traditional jobs.

WIMDOI industrial and campaign issues identified include:

- anti-discrimination obligations
- Unions to bargain for and prosecute work and family provisions for members; and
- Unions to develop clear plans for industrial and campaign action

Supporting women in their workplace:

- Make contact with women workers/unionists (particularly young women) in workplaces; and
- Develop women support networks and women’s committee structures in workplaces.

Developing women activists:

- Provide women activists with support and education; and
- Encourage women to get involved in union activities.

Education / information:

- Promote education programs to women;
- Provide information for apprentices on unions; and
- Provide access to information and networking opportunities to women working in non-traditional jobs via the ACTU (WIMDOI) website and face book page.
Building influence in the union:

- Explore options for establishing a Women’s Committee with representative at Union Executive level;
- Explore options to encourage women take up leadership roles within their union; and
- Conference participants to raise awareness of WIMDOI/issues within the union.

Communication / WIMDOI networks:

- ACTU / Unions / participants to maintain ongoing communication of conference participants and other interested women via the WIMDOI face book page and email list.

10. Next Steps

- Promote and support the NSW Women in Manufacturing Conference in March 2011 (which coincides with International Women’s Day 100 year anniversary);
- Promote and support the next 2012 WIMDOI Conference.

Sponsors and supporters

ACTU
AMIEU
CEPU (Plumbers)
Maritime Credit Union
Members Equity Bank
Queensland Council of Unions
Queensland Office for Women

Thank you to the WIMDOI Conference Organising Committee.