

Unions commemorate 50 year anniversary of 1974 Equal Pay Case

Today, the Australian union movement marks the 50th anniversary of the 1974 Equal Pay Case, a historic milestone in the campaign for gender equality.

The landmark decision by the Arbitration Commission on 2 May 1974 brought an end to the discriminatory practice of separate minimum wages based on gender, laying the foundation for equal pay for equal work.

The 1974 Equal Pay Case challenged the prevailing notion of the "family wage" and affirmed the principle that women should receive equal pay for their labour. The ruling was the result of many decades of women unionists like Edna Ryan and Muriel Heagney, as well as their allies, campaigning for equal pay.

While the legal framework for equal pay exists, achieving true equality in practice remains a challenge. Working women, particularly those in feminised industries, continue to face systemic barriers and wage disparities rooted in the devaluation of their work.

The ACTU's current push for an interim pay rise of at least 9% in key feminised industries is part of the ongoing struggle to address the gender pay gap and ensure that women are properly respected and paid for their contributions in the workforce.

In its Annual Wage Review reply submissions filed with the Fair Work Commission, the ACTU advocated for a 5% increase across all awards, supplemented by at least an additional 4% in occupations that have historically been undervalued based on gender, including care and degree-qualified occupations in early childhood education, education and health support services, veterinary care and disability home care, among others.

If accepted, a full-time care worker could see their pay boosted by \$90 a week - a step towards equal pay, pending a full assessment. A similar assessment in aged care recently found that workers required up to 23% pay increases to achieve pay equity.

On the 50th anniversary of the Equal Pay Case, the union movement reaffirms its commitment to campaigning for gender equality and building a society where every worker is valued and respected for their labour.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Secretary Sally McManus:

"Today, we honour the legacy of union women who fought for equal pay and recommit ourselves to the ongoing fight for fair wages and dignity for workers who are undervalued and underpaid.

"Employer opposition to giving working women a pay rise is reminiscent of their past resistance to progressive wage reforms. Employer groups were on the wrong side of history then and they are on the wrong side of history now.

"Our push for a 9% pay increase in key feminised industries is part of a broader struggle to address the gender pay gap and build a future where all workers are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve."

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