

# WHAT UNIONS MUST DO



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**T**he Australian trade union movement has started the process for critical evaluation

and direction of its mode of operation. One of the central issues which has risen during this critical evaluation process is that unions need to expand their service provision in a relevant and appropriate manner. Most of the discussions generated from the union movement during the evaluation process has centered on the issue of providing more services to members. The provision of discount telephone calls and health care insurance are some of the services that are being provided as a way to encourage workers to join unions as well as for existing members to renew their membership.

While service provision, and in particular relevant service delivery, is an important component of trade unions in Australia, it is also important

for the union movement to address the social and political aspects of their structures and work. The social focus and political structures of the union movement have been a peripheral issue during the critical evaluation discuss-

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ions. Indeed, the traditional Anglo or political framework of the union movement has not even received a critical analysis or even discussion. This reveals that the union movement is politically reluctant to change its structures. The political issues of ethnicity and

gender have been excluded and not considered as important issues to address. However, a consideration of these political issues would make the union movement more appropriate and accountable to its membership.

In Victoria, almost 24 percent of all unionists were born in non-English-speaking countries. The national figure for Australia is 16 percent. This large minority of non-English-speaking members should raise important issues for the trade union movement to consider when developing political and social strategies. Unfortunately, such information is ignored and assigned to the dusty bookshelves of union bureaucrats, so much so that during the restructuring process the specific interests and needs of non-English-speaking background (NESB) workers were ignored and not addressed appropriately by union officials.

Various studies have documented the discontent



that NESB women have with unions. Their complaints include:

- ♦ the lack of special services to meet the specific needs of immigrant women
- ♦ non-pursuance by unions of the issues that are important to immigrant women
- ♦ the low level of participation in unions
- ♦ the negative perceptions held by immigrant women of their trade unions, and
- ♦ the underrepresentation of immigrant women in official union positions, relative to their membership.

Indeed, one of the pertinent issues raised is the underrepresentation of immigrant women in key union positions compared to their overrepresentation in certain industries. One such industry where NESB women are predominantly represented is the manufacturing industry. The manufacturing industry is covered by the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union (TCFU) in Melbourne. Women in Industry and Community Health (WICH) visited the TCFU and spoke to the assistant secretary, Nurcan Ozturk, on a wide range of issues concerning NESB women workers and the union movement.

Nurcan Ozturk migrated to Australia with her family from Turkey. Nurcan worked in the clothing industry, making male and female garments. While working as an industrial worker she was

Australian unions, where 16 percent of members are from non-English speaking countries, need to consider political issues of ethnicity and gender. Addressing these issues would make the union movement more appropriate and accountable to its members.

elected as the shop steward. After serving as a shop steward she was employed by the TCFU as the Occupational Health and Training Officer. Nurcan was reluctant to undertake this position as she had no prior training or experience in this area. However, the union convinced her to accept the position. Nurcan has been in the position of assistant

secretary for two years.

According to Nurcan, the clothing division of the TCFU is predominantly made up of NESB women. Nurcan believes that her branch did not make a conscious decision for the union to employ NESB women but rather it is the result of the predominance of NESB in this industry. Nurcan believes that this is an appropriate way for the union to operate. She stated that the union hierarchy had to be a representative of its membership or else it would lose contact with the membership and issues relevant to them.

Nurcan pointed out that the TCFU was in a unique position in terms of being representative of its membership. She pointed out that many unions are still white, Anglo-dominated and many are resisting change.

WICH believes it is important for the trade union movement to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate representation for their membership—in particular to, NESB women. This is crucial if the union movement is to increase its relevance to migrant women. *Source: Women in Industry and Community Health, 1995*

