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Bolshie Women

Resisting state reform in New Zealand.

By Janet Lindsay Bedggood

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology, the University of Auckland, 2002.
Abstract

This thesis looks at the way the historical oppression of women in capitalist society is reproduced through a continuing gender division of labour at home and in the workplace. Women's primary responsibility for domestic labour in the home both defines and disadvantages them in the labour market. I argue that changing women's inferior status under capitalism depends on women organising for equality in the labour market.

I develop the argument around women's status by looking at the way state activity shaped the conditions for social reproduction in the post-war period of capitalist growth followed by the onset of economic decline and state restructuring in New Zealand. I take a classical Marxist political economy approach to explain the end of the post-war boom as a 'structural crisis' of falling profits requiring the state to act for capital by establishing the conditions for the market to 'restructure' production to restore the conditions for profitability.

The thesis focuses on the reduction of state welfare provision which impacted on women both as domestic labourers and wage labourers. These measures generated opposition. First, government's proposal for domestic purpose beneficiaries to undertake 'workfare' signalled a (failed) attempt to propel these women into work as
a reserve army of labour and out of their primary role as domestic labourers supported by the state.

Second, reducing state spending on the 'social wage' impacted directly on women workers in state sector areas of education and health. I interviewed women teachers who were active in their unions in resisting the pressures of reform and defending their jobs. The most politically conscious teachers were Marxists who agitated to advance workers from a trade union consciousness to a class consciousness. They understood that the union struggle was a class struggle of workers against a capitalist class on the offensive. They challenged union bureaucrats in accommodating to this.

In their interventions, these women demonstrated the possibilities for overcoming gender inequality not through separatist strategies or liberal reforms that leave capitalist structures intact but through the transformative potential of union struggle for the 'socialist project'.
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I was impressed with the commitment and sustained activity of my teacher informants who worked in their unions to maintain education standards and defend their collective. I thank all of them for giving their accounts of their involvement in struggle.
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ABBREVIATIONS

ASTE  Association of Staff in Tertiary Education
ATTI  Association of Teachers in Tertiary Institutions
AUS   Association of University Staff
CEO   Chief Executive Officer
DPB   Domestic Purposes Benefit
DSW   Department of Social Welfare
ECA   Employment Contracts Act
ECB   Employment Contracts Bill
ERO   Education Review Office
MWA   Ministry of Women's Affairs
NZCTU New Zealand Council of Trade Unions
NZEI  New Zealand Educational Institute
OECD  Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPTA  Post Primary Teachers Association
SOE   State Owned Enterprise