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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
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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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Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction	viii
1. Critique of Crisis and Restructuring	1
Neo-liberalism: New Right 'capture' forces reform	2
Left social democrats: Fordism and the Regulation Theorists	8
Marxist explanations of crisis and restructuring	23
Concluding remarks on critique	36
2. Women and the State	42
Inclusion in the Polity: historical moves for women's citizenship	44
Theorising gender and social status	54
The cult of domesticity and the family wage	56
Gendered citizenship and the domestic purposes benefit	61
Domestic labourers as a reserve army of labour	63
Workfare for domestic purpose beneficiaries	76
The Ministry of Women's Affairs: strategic differences over policy	79

Retreat on a community wage for domestic purpose beneficiaries	82
Conclusion	84
3. Arguments about domestic labour	86
Domestic labour: a woman's job	86
The domestic labour debates	91
Seccombe and domestic labour as value creating: fusion	93
Domestic labour as a separate mode of production: autonomy	99
Mutuality or the links between domestic labour and wage labour	108
4. Unions: moving on the wage labour front	118
Unions: conservative or militant	119
Education unions as craft or industrial	124
Reforms unsettle the sector	130
Union Officials	134
Teachers as moderate	136
Unions and class consciousness	138
The broader context of the Employment Contracts Act	141
The effects of the Employment Contracts Act on women workers	150
Intermezzo: Introducing the Interviews	156
5. Early childhood teachers: a gendered sector	161
The early childhood education sector	161

Care v. education	164
Organisational pragmatism	166
Managing restructuring	168
Union militancy	173
A gendered sector	176
6. The union fightback	182
Picot: defending the reform	179
Resisting the change in the schools sector: devolution to the (elusive) community	182
Resisting the change in the schools sector: bulk funding	187
Accepting change in the Polytechnics and Colleges of Education	194
Union approaches to the Employment Contracts Bill	199
Pay parity: relationships between the two schools unions	206
Pressure at the chalkface: defending job conditions against the new managerialism	210
A wider view of professionalism: national education unions and a national education system	218
7. Feminists/Militants/Marxist teachers	226
Gendered sectors	226
Women's push for equity in unions	241
Democratising the union: the push from below	254
Militant teachers	264

8. Conclusion	273
Appendix	280
Bibliography	287

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' 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