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Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations, vol. 48, n° 4, 1993, p. 762-768.

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URI: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050899ar>

DOI: 10.7202/050899ar

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The Relationship Between Union Commitment and Gender

Some Qualifying Factors

Louise Thornthwaite

The relationship between gender and union commitment has been the subject of a number of studies in the last decade (see Wetzel et al. 1991). In the context of a relative increase in female unionization, which has accompanied the rising participation of women in paid work, the extent to which women are committed to their unions is of increasing salience in assessing the sources and strength of union solidarity. Of crucial importance is whether unions need to develop specific gender-related strategies for bonding with female members. Recent studies of union commitment, including those evaluating the impact of gender, have been based on measurements of a set of union-related attitudinal dimensions (Gordon et al. 1984, Fullager 1986, Thacker et al. 1989, Wetzel et al. 1991). There are two aspects of union attachment which this literature neglects. First, in focusing predominately on attitudes as a measure of commitment, the research has neglected the behavioural dimensions of union commitment and in particular, the link between action and gender. Second, it does not take into account alternative forms of representation available to women workers. Research on Australian unions suggests, however, that unions may be facing new, competing sources of representation for women workers (Thornthwaite 1992). Where this is the case, empirical investigation of the attitudes and behaviour of women workers towards these alternatives may be critical to an effective assessment of women's union commitment levels.

The methodology used in a recent paper by Wetzel, Gallagher and Soloshy (1991) is typical of union commitment studies. Drawing on the multidimensional measure developed by Gordon et al. (1980) and subsequent empirical investigations, their study examined three dimensions of union commitment: union loyalty, willingness to work for the union, and responsibility to the union. The gender relationship was evaluated by comparing men's and

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women's responses in relation to each of these dimensions and a number of identified independent variables pertaining to personal characteristics, social influences, early union membership experiences and job satisfaction. In its finding that gender contributed to only one of the three commitment dimensions, this paper makes a substantial contribution to the debate on the relationship between gender and union commitment.

Gordon et al. (1980, 1984) developed this methodology, based on standardized measures of union commitment, from earlier studies of organizational commitment. However, union commitment has been the subject of behavioural research on dual allegiance since the 1950s. Dual allegiance studies derived from a concern with whether workers could be committed to both the union and firm, and the factors which sway their orientations towards both (Sherer and Morishima 1989). These earlier and more recent studies have measured union commitment levels as a direct function of workers' orientations to their union. They have focused on attitudes and behavioural intent rather than the relationship between actual behaviour and commitment. The measuring of the relationship between gender and union commitment has therefore occurred solely through comparisons of men's and women's attitudes and intentions rather than actions. The research has not compared women's attitudes to unions with those towards alternative representational sources.

This focus might be unproblematic where unions face no competition for the loyalties of their members. In the last twenty years, however, the human resource management movement has encouraged the introduction of alternative organizational forms, including participative mechanisms, as well as managerial initiatives directed at the individual employee. These practices have been characterized partly as management strategies to buy out their employees' union impulses (Boxall and Dowling 1990, Lipset 1986). During this time, equal opportunity officials have emerged in many Australian organizations to devise and implement equity policies in regard to the employment relationship. These officials have been appointed largely in response to specific statutory requirements within the various Australian legal jurisdictions. In other western countries, equity officials have also emerged in management hierarchies through either managerial choice or legislative fiat. In providing an alternative representative of women's specific concerns within organizations, these officials are a potential challenge to union organization of women workers and are therefore particularly pertinent to the relationship between gender and union commitment.

METHODOLOGY

The research focused on public sector employment in one Australian state, New South Wales (NSW). During the early 1980s, equal opportunity

officials were appointed within the management hierarchies of most New South Wales government organizations. This was a direct result of amendments in 1980 to the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 (New South Wales) which required most public sector organizations to design and implement an equal employment opportunity management plan, which incorporated the review of personnel policies for discriminatory elements and setting of goals for reform. The plans were to promote equity on a number of grounds, including sex, race and marital status. Most organizations appointed management officials and support staff specifically to fulfill this role. Equal opportunity practitioners generally also became responsible for handling enquiries and complaints of discrimination and for establishing internal grievance mechanisms to deal with such complaints. In most other Australian states, similar provisions apply to public sector employment. Private sector employers in Australia remain exempt from such general provisions, although the Affirmative Action Act 1986 (Commonwealth) requires most to provide equal employment opportunity programmes in relation to women employees and hence many firms have also appointed equity officials at managerial level.

The study investigated women's choices of representation for discrimination grievances during the 1980s. This is a relatively new and expanding area of grievance activity, analysis of which provides a preliminary insight into the avenues which women are pursuing for assistance with particular types of grievances. Women employed in New South Wales government organizations essentially have the choice of seeking help through their trade union, through internal organizational mechanisms administered by equity officials or through state agencies, including the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board and Equal Opportunity Tribunal. These latter bodies provide respectively for the conciliation and quasi-judicial adjudication of discrimination complaints. Information about women's choices of representation was drawn from union journals, management and union records, and interviews with officials of ten unions and eighteen public sector organizations. The focus was on two large and highly unionized New South Wales government organizations, the Police Force and Water Board, and the major unions with organizational coverage. The Police Force and Water Board have both experienced complaints by workers to the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board and Equal Opportunity Tribunal, and a moderate number of complaints through the internal grievance mechanisms administered by their equity officials. Due to union amalgamations, there has been some change in the unions covering these organizations in recent years. In the 1980s, however, the Police Force was almost completely organized by the New South Wales Police Association, and the Water Board's salaried and waged workers were respectively organized by the Municipal Officers' Association (Water Sub-Branch) and the Water and Sewerage Employees' Union. All three have predominately male memberships

(80% and above). The importance of analyzing such unions is underlined by the degree of workforce segmentation in Australia which results in many women being members of male dominated unions and the increasing proportion of women in traditionally male dominated unions during the 1980s. Further, the question of men's and women's relative union commitment levels may be especially salient in the case of male dominated unions, particularly those in which the environment for women members is relatively alienating.

DISCUSSION

One of the early policy initiatives of equal employment opportunity practitioners in most NSW government organizations was to establish a grievance procedure specifically for resolving complaints of discrimination. The intention was to resolve such grievances internally and as informally as possible, to avoid the lodgement of such matters by workers with the state's anti-discrimination agencies. The grievance procedures established by equity officials have typically assigned a major role, particularly in the early stages, to the organization's equal opportunity official as well as other elected or nominated women's representatives and supervisors. Only a minor role has been assigned to trade unions. The Police Force procedure, for instance, confined union involvement to the second stage, at which one union representative sat on a six member grievance committee. Beyond this stage, the Deputy Commissioners and the Commissioner of the Police Force were responsible for handling grievances. The Water Board's procedure excluded trade union involvement entirely until 1988, when union delegates were included as grievance handlers alongside a range of managers and management designated officials (Thornthwaite 1992). Individual workers are required to pursue their grievances through these procedures without union advocacy, the initial grievance handler being portrayed as the protector of their rights. Hence the procedures can be characterized as individualising workers' pursuits of their rights.

The exclusion of unions from these processes contrasts sharply with grievance procedures contained in collective agreements which may also handle individual problems. For instance, typically these provide for equal participation of union and management officials in decision-making, and hence also for union representation of workers' interests. Such procedures have been relatively uncommon in Australia, however, largely because state-run systems of conciliation and arbitration have provided for the settlement of disputes arising out of industrial awards, which are collective agreements having the force of law. Hence grievances have tended to be resolved through union-management negotiations at various levels or, as a final resort, through the conciliation and arbitration tribunals.

The grievance procedures established by equity officials have tended to be extensively used by workers. There were, for instance, 72 grievances formally lodged through the Water Board's grievance procedure in its first four years of operation. This excludes the indeterminate number of employee enquiries and informal discussions held over such matters with the Water Board's equal opportunity officers. However, the use of these procedures has been neither confined, nor indeed predominately related, to matters of unlawful discrimination. Workers have tended to use them to express discontent over such matters as work appraisals, personality problems, and management decisions on promotion, transfer and acting experience. The individualized nature of these grievance processes and, typically, the lack of formal union involvement have implications for the collective representation of workers' interests in these organizations.

Closer examination of the Police Force and Water Board revealed also, however, that women workers are raising discrimination complaints almost exclusively with equal opportunity officials, in preference to their unions. Despite a continuous incidence of discrimination complaints within both organizations during this period, none of the three unions were formally involved in the handling of any complaints. Women workers, in particular, failed to seek union advice, assistance or ongoing representation with such grievances. Instead they sought help from the management-designated equity officers. This behavioural pattern was observed also in relation to the other seven unions studied. Some notable exceptions, such as the New South Wales Teachers' Association and the Public Service Association, had provided ongoing advice and assistance to numerous women with discrimination enquiries and/or complaints. Generally however, women in the public sector have not sought their union's help with such matters. Yet the levels of complaints through organizational grievance procedures and the state anti-discrimination agencies indicate that discrimination is a widespread source of complaints within New South Wales government organizations. Indeed a disproportionate number of complaints to the state agencies are lodged by public sector workers (Thornthwaite 1993).

The reasons for these representational choices by women are discussed elsewhere (Thornthwaite 1992). They partly relate to union policies on women's issues and membership composition. Women form a far higher proportion of the memberships of both the Teachers' Federation and the Public Service Association than of the other unions studied and both these unions have devoted considerable resources to women's specific concerns. However, the Municipal Officers' Association (Water Sub-Branch), which organizes the Water Board's salaried employees, has also vigorously pursued a range of affirmative action objectives for women members and yet, its women members have not sought help with discrimination complaints. The representational

choices are also partly due to the nature of union strategy. In approaching unions for assistance with such grievances, women face the prospect of distressing and sensitive experiences being publicly aired, the grievance escalating and their discretion over its resolution being removed. By comparison, equal opportunity practitioners offer a relatively informal, personalized and discreet channel for expressing such matters. Typically these officials are women, which may also make them a more attractive first "port of call" for women workers. By comparison, the officialdom of two of the three unions on which the study centres was almost exclusively male and of the other, the Municipal Officers Association (Water Sub-Branch), predominately male. While providing a means of resolving discrimination complaints, however, these equity officials have also been accessible for handling grievances over a broad range of employment issues, which traditionally workers would have been able to formally pursue only through union sponsored avenues. Hence these management officials have provided a channel alternative to trade unions for voicing and resolving grievances concerning many aspects of management policy and practice.

CONCLUSIONS

While this study's findings are based on preliminary research only, they strongly suggest that equity officials within New South Wales government organizations may constitute a challenge to unions for the loyalties of women workers. The challenge takes two forms. First, they have emerged both as promoters of women's specific concerns and as a source of advice, assistance and the formal means through which women can remedy grievances of an ostensibly individual nature on a range of employment issues. In the organizations studied, the behaviour of women workers suggests that they view equity officials as more sympathetic, accessible and effective than unions in relation to such grievances. The extent to which these management officials split women worker's allegiances, however, remains unclear. Second, equity officials commonly administer an ad hoc, individualized grievance process which largely excludes trade unions and which competes directly with the collective mechanisms and representation offered by unions.

These findings suggest that for women's and men's relative union commitment levels to be adequately assessed, factors other than union-related attitudinal dimensions also require consideration. First, the link between workers' actions and gender must be examined. Second, research needs to assess the extent to which women workers are attached to alternative forms of representation. Multi-dimensional measures of union commitment such as that developed by Gordon et al. (1980) are insufficient to grasp the complexities of

workers' orientations. Further, if the gender of equity officials is affecting these orientations, the gender composition of union leaderships is also significant to the assessment of union commitment. Comparative analysis is, however, necessary to assess the generalizability of these qualifying factors to the measurement of union commitment.

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