

# WE ARE UNION

WOMEN



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2023 WRAP UP

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# By the numbers



**27,691**

women in our network

**53**

events and trainings

**2,492**

event attendees

**2,020**

individual conversations about women's rights and safety at work

**1**

statue of a feminist unionist







# For cultural change we need to end corporate cover-ups

By Wil Stracke

Imagine starting a new job at a new workplace, only to discover that the work exposes you to a hazard that has caused injury and harm to your new co-workers and predecessors. The hazard could be dealt with, but instead, your employer chose to pay a sum of money to your predecessor for them to keep their injury quiet. Your predecessor begrudgingly had to accept after a long and drawn out process where they were treated as the problem.

Bizarrely, this is not only completely legal in Australian workplaces, it is the accepted norm. In order to resolve a workplace injury, workers are coerced into signing "Non-Disclosure Agreements" (NDAs) that require them to keep all details of their injury and how it occurred completely secret - even from family and friends. And one common toxic hazard that is covered up by these secrecy clauses is workplace sexual harassment.

NDAs are so prevalent in cases of workplace sexual harassment that unions and workplace lawyers say they are effectively compulsory. Arbiters of disputes admonish advocates as "unreasonable" if their client seeks compensation and wishes to preserve their right to speak openly of their experience.

Why? Why do businesses possess this implied right to cover-up their misdeeds? Why do we tell victim-survivors that the business reputation of their employer is more valuable than their own healing or the safety of others? Compensation isn't hush money - but employers are treating it like it is.

As an employee, as a client, or as a consumer, you have a right to know about the business practices of brands you deal with. Australian businesses spend billions in public relations, protecting and enhancing their brand image. They invest in advertising campaigns to associate their business with progressive values and causes, but fiercely protect themselves from scrutiny on the same.

Sunlight is the best disinfectant. Removing business' ability to attach NDAs to every workplace sexual harassment claim will encourage transparency in the way businesses deal with gendered violence.

Sexual harassment and all forms of gendered violence are serious occupational health and safety issues, and like any other OHS issue, they can be controlled and eliminated. Contrary to popular belief, simply terminating the perpetrator is rarely an ideal

response. System change and positive leadership can all help to create culturally safe workplaces where everyone can contribute and no-one is left behind. Implementing such change is the legal responsibility of any business where gendered violence hazards are identified. But rather than dealing with these hazards, Australian businesses are sweeping the problem under the rug using NDAs.

But by far the greatest harm of NDAs is inflicted upon the victim-survivors who are coerced into signing them. Through research in the Victorian union movement, we know that workers who sign NDAs frequently come to regret their decision but remain bound by the terms of the NDA for life. Workers have described to us the trauma of feeling afraid to disclose their harassment even to close family members or counsellors, fearing - with good reason - legal charges against them. It is obscene that victims can be silenced in this way.

Journalists, legal advocates and unions have long decried the chilling effect of NDAs on our workplace relations. Now, working women are campaigning for legislation to restrict the use of these NDAs in cases of sexual harassment.

# End NDAs Activist Network

## Downloads

- Fact sheet
- Conversation guide
- Model EBA clause



• As part of 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence, workers across Victoria hosted meetings about NDAs. More than 30 workplace meetings were held, and thousands of postcards signed that will add to more than 3,000 signatures on the online petition.

• Additionally, CPD training on the ethical issues surrounding the use of NDAs in sexual harassment settlement agreements was provided for lawyers and legal professionals organised in partnership with the Australian Services Union (who represent legal practitioners) and Maurice Blackburn Lawyers with 50 practitioner attendees.

• There is now an established NDA Activist Network that meets monthly to plan actions for the campaign and receive training. Activists have hosted more than 25 community activities to end the misuse of NDAs including workplace meetings, street stalls, train station handouts and events.

• We have hosted more than 15 educational briefings for members, officials and activists both online and at various events.

• An NDA tip line allows workers who have signed NDAs to safely disclose their experiences of signing an NDA.

- Women's Parliament Day in June brought 60 union women to Victorian Parliament to speak to 58 MPs across the political landscape about ending the misuse of NDAs. Women of all different experiences and industries shared their stories.





# WRAW Con

In August 125 union women gathered in Solidarity Hall for a conference to inspire and equip activists to win change in their workplaces.

The agenda was jam-packed with revolutionary workplace ideas. Amongst the topics:

- *Using new workplace laws introduced by State and Federal Labor governments to create safer, fairer workplaces for working women'*
- *The role intimacy coordinators and intimacy safety guidelines play in actors' safety on set*
- *Organising workers in hospo around rights & safety*
- *Early childhood educators campaigning to win fair wages and working conditions*
- *Closing the super pay gap*
- *How women in union are advancing claims for reproductive health, menstruation and menopause health leave for workers*
- *How to build class solidarity across race and gender divides*
- *How the women of Myanmar are fighting the oppression of the military junta*
- *Eliminating pay secrecy provisions and gender pay inequality*
- *Ending gender segregation of our workforces and ending the gender pay gap*

The conference also heard from the Hon. Natalie Hutchins, Minister for Women & Minister for Education (and the first woman to be elected Assistant Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council!) and ACTU First Nations Educator and Kaurna woman Rachel Bos about the Voice to Parliament.



*Sharon Shumba spoke about safety on ship sites & her experience in the male-dominated maritime industry*





# Feminism at the Hall

In November as part of the #16Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence, activist women discussed the work of eliminating gender-based violence in our workplaces and communities at "Comrades & Commissioners" – a Feminism at the Hall Event

The evening brought together more than a hundred feminist activists with Micaela Cronin, Federal Commissioner for Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, Dr. Niki Vincent, Victorian Public Sector Gender Equality Commissioner, and Ro Allen, Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner. We heard about their roles and responsibilities in ending gender inequality and gender based violence.

This 16 Days Feminism at the Hall event was the last of 2023. Earlier, we held an event with the ACTU, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA, Ethical Clothing Australia and Action Aid to commemorate 10 years since the Rana Plaza building collapse that killed more than 1100 mostly women garment workers and discuss how collectively we can fight for garment worker safety in Australia and internationally through international solidarity and supply chain organising. During WRAW Fest, our Feminism at the Hall event focused on ending the misuse of NDAs.





# EMPLOYERS:

## Ignoring sexual harassment in your workplace is a crime.

*Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 s.26(1)  
Maximum penalty: \$332,856 individual, \$1,664,280 body corporate*

SAFE AND  
RESPECTFUL  
WORKPLACES  
TRAINING

## First prosecution for Gendered Violence as OHS issue

In November the boss of two coffee shops in hospital settings was convicted and fined for the sexual harassment of multiple staff.

The court heard six workers, aged as young as 16, were sexually harassed physically and verbally by their boss and also witnessed other staff being harassed.

The sexual harassment included touching, groping and sexually intrusive and suggestive comments.

WorkSafe's investigation found the boss' behaviour stretched back to 2014, and although the café had an online bullying and harassment policy, it had no contact details to make a report and none of the employees understood who they could complain to.

This is the first ever fine and prosecution WorkSafe has

imposed for sexual harassment. It has taken years of advocacy by women in union to have gendered violence understood as a workplace health and safety issue.

We're proud union women have led this change in thinking and action around sexual harassment - as an OHS issue we can eliminate, not just a nebulous society-wide problem to hold morning teas about.

We're proud that WorkSafe has succeeded in its first prosecution. We're proud of the work the Victorian Labor government has done in advocating for our approach at a national level.

**We won't stop until every  
worker in every workplace  
is safe from gendered  
violence.**

## Safety and Rights Training

We provide training in work-related gendered violence through various courses that look at the issue through a safety lens, discussing the cultural drivers of the behaviour and how it can be dealt with by workplace leaders under OHS legislation.

In 2023 we have trained 39 workplace Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) in work-related gendered violence including sexual harassment, 36 participants in creating safe and respectful workplace cultures, and 20 employers and employees on employer obligations under the new National Employment Standards entitlements for Family and Domestic Violence leave and support.



# Family & Domestic Violence Leave – now a national standard

**How union members in one workplace made history... and will save lives**

## **Paid family and domestic violence leave:**

*All employees can access 10 days of paid family and domestic violence leave each year. This includes full-time, part-time and casual employees.*

*Employees must be experiencing family and domestic violence to be eligible to take paid family and domestic violence leave.*

*The entitlement to paid family and domestic violence leave comes from the National Employment Standards (NES). It's a paid minimum leave entitlement, like annual leave or paid sick and carer's leave.*

In 2010, the ASU members at Surf Coast Shire local government negotiated the world's first paid leave provisions for workers experiencing domestic and family violence.

Union members put forward the clause after learning that fellow ASU members had lost their jobs as a result of their experience of family violence.

At the time, the ASU delegate said:

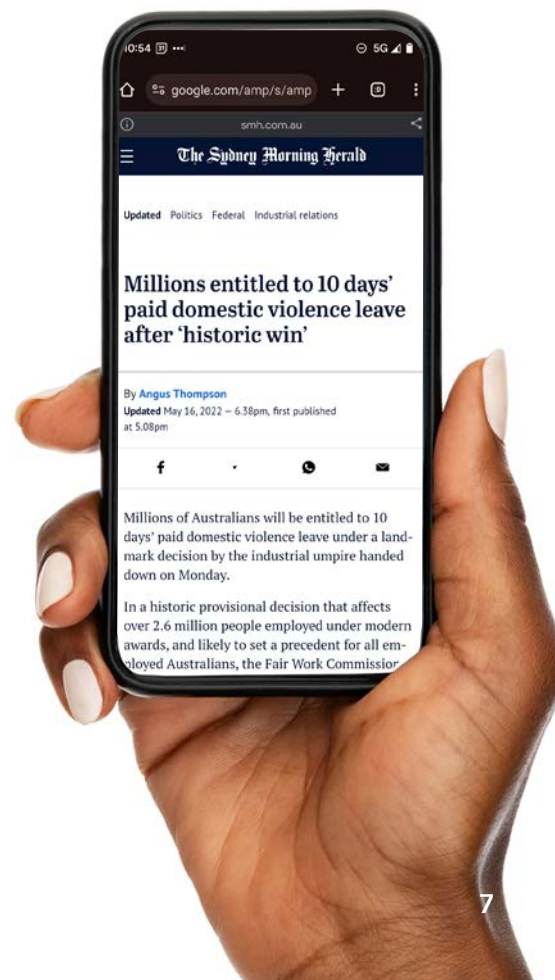
*"To me, this clause is for the thousands of workers that have only one secure thing in their life - a job. If we can give people an opportunity to escape family violence without endangering the one secure thing they have, then we are giving workers and their children an opportunity to stop the misery and live in safety."*

Slowly, more union workplaces started to introduce similar provisions using the ASU template. The conversation grew.

Some workplaces fiercely opposed the leave. Some media outlets poked fun at the union movement for daring to champion such provisions. But union members kept making their voices heard – and sharing their experiences of how the leave could help.

'The Victorian Labor government stepped up to the plate, introducing 20 days leave across the Victorian Public Sector. And then Federal Labor came on board, taking a policy to introduce 10 days FDVL in to the NES to a Federal Election. Union advocates campaigned tirelessly to make that happen.

As a result, in 2023 paid family and domestic violence leave became a workplace right for full-time, part-time and casual employees across Australia.



**This is union activism.**

# Winning a better childcare sector!

The United Workers Union, Australian Education Union and Independent Education Union have jointly filed for the first national multi enterprise agreement for early childhood educators on the first day of the new bargaining laws.

This is the first application of its kind in Australia, only made possible through new Multi Employer Bargaining laws which were campaigned for by unions and introduced by the Federal Labor government and came into effect on 6 June 2023.

The proposed multi-enterprise agreement calls for a 20% increase and covers 60 employers and 12,000 Early Childhood Education workers.

This is HUGE. The new laws will make a huge difference to women working in undervalued industries like early childhood education.

Djarra Liotta-Ndiaye, Educator and UWU Delegate, said *"I'm proud to be a part of the first group of workers to use the new Multi-Employer Bargaining laws. Educators like me have been campaigning for livable wages and quality early education for years. The sector has been grossly underpaid for many years and we're now chronically understaffed"*.

***"It's time to pay educators what they're worth and build the sustainable early education sector that children and families deserve."***





# Anna Stewart Memorial Project



Anna Stewart was a journalist and active Victorian union official who tragically lost her life aged 35. The Anna Stewart Memorial Project is a women's leadership training and development program designed to encourage more women to be active in their unions.

The "Annas" learn campaigning and organising skills, women's leadership, union women's history, their rights as a delegate or health and safety representative in the workplace and emerging issues for women at work. Participants learn from the experience of other women from diverse industries, unions and occupations through placement in their own union and other participating unions where they complete worksite meetings, training, campaign events, communications and media training and more.

Victorian Trades Hall Council runs two Anna Stewart Memorial Project intakes of two weeks each per year.

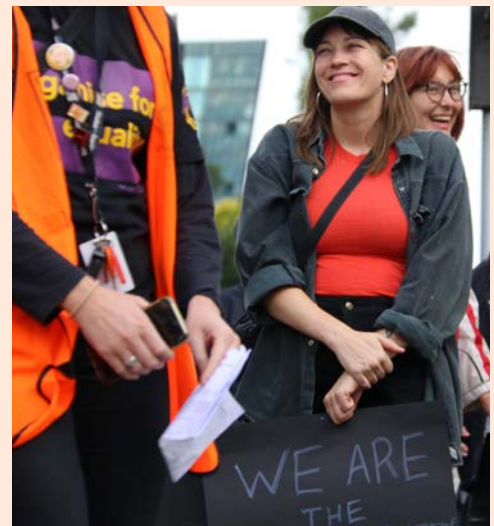
In 2023, 23 women from 11 unions completed the Project, joining the more than 1000 alumni of the Project since 1984. In 2024 we look forward to celebrating 40 years of the Anna Stewart Memorial Project with a reunion event for former Annas and their mentors. Alumni include current and former union secretaries, civic leaders and Members of Parliament, attesting to the success of the Project.

*"An amazing positive experience where I have learned a lot about myself while being supported by the awesome women around me. I feel empowered and confident to move forward with the next chapter in my life."*

*"A wonderful experience that opened my eyes and mind to the behind the scenes work of Trades Hall and the AEU. Constant learning and reflection on current practice and the where to next."*

*"This experience has opened my eyes and heart in so many profound ways. Being in a collective of women with incredible strong voices and passion has ignited a fire in me. I can see so many different perspectives I would not have without the ASMP."*









## International Women's Day

International Womens Day started as International Working Women's Day, so it's only fitting that the annual march in Melbourne is organised by the women of the union movement from Victorian Trades Hall Council.

Each year thousands of women and gender-diverse people rally and march through the streets of Melbourne for safety, respect and equality.

IWD kicked off our Women's Rights at Work Festival (WRAW Fest) - a two week festival with over 12 events focused on women's rights and safety at work.

This included an educational session with Worksafe about psychosocial hazards, a Women HSRs Networking



night, a re-launch of our WRAW Chat structured conversation guide, a panel on menstruation, menopause and reproductive leave with unions engaged in bargaining on the issue, a mini-conference of solidarity panels about building allyship across, race, class and gender diversity and more.



# Women Onsite



Australia has one of the most gender-segregated workforces in the world, and it's a major driver of gender pay inequality.

Women Onsite is a VTHC project that works directly with women interested in a career in mainly male industries of construction, manufacturing, auto and clean energy. We work with women to identify their personal barriers offer direct resourcing to them; including Job Readiness sessions, Try a Trade days and Introduction to Industry sessions.

Barbara Huggins, the lead of the women onsite project, says that some of the cultural barriers to women's participation in trades are complex, but others are remarkably simple to overcome.

*"One of the major barriers stopping women from starting an apprenticeship is that they literally don't have the tools - I mean a literal tool set. Apprentices are typically given the list of the tools they need to buy on their first day and then spend the next year or so having the cost deducted from their pay. So when you're changing careers at 28 (the average age a woman starts a trade) and reducing your income significantly, going into debt on your first day is a barrier so paying for the tools a woman needs, can be all it takes"*



## Tradie social night

In July Women Onsite hosted a social event for tradeswomen and non-binary folks to build a social support network for apprentices and qualified tradies.

***"I found a community of electrical trades women... and they were such a great community for me, like they were all really passionate about getting more women into the industry."***

- Apprentice Electrician

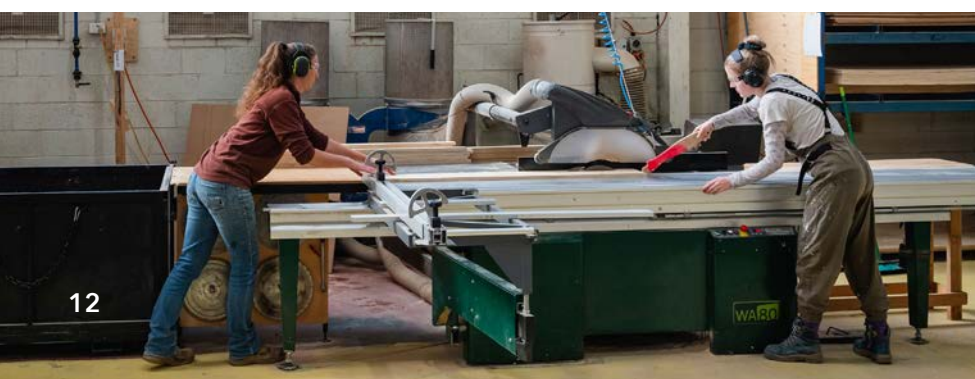
## Advocacy

The voices of working women must be heard in every space that counts! Making submissions, appearing at inquiries and being on committee's isn't glamorous. It is, however, an important way to ensure the challenges faced by working women are front and centre for decision makers.

VTHC has endorsed a platform for change based on the input of thousands of working women across the state. That platform informs all our advocacy.

VTHC is represented on a number of important committees.

Assistant Secretary Wil Stracke sits on the Equal Workplaces Advisory Council, Building Respect Committee (overseeing the implementation of the





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Building Equality Strategy for women in the construction industry), Women in Apprenticeships Advisory Group, Power to Prevent Coalition and the advisory group assisting the Victorian Public Sector Gender Equality Commissioner around implementation of the Victorian Gender Equality Act. Wil was also a member of the Ministerial Taskforce on Workplace Sexual Harassment.

In 2023, Wil was a presenter at a number of events focused on the challenges faced by working women. This includes at the Victorian Government's 'Building Respect Conference' and 'SEC Energy Jobs and Skills Forum' panel on women in energy.

At a national level, Wil participated in the national roundtable measuring the impact of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children coordinated by the Federal Commissioner for Domestic and Family Violence and in consultations regarding disclosures of historical workplace sexual harassment coordinated by the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner. Wil has also been an ongoing

participant in consultations regarding the proposed use of procurement to meet gender targets in the Australian Skills Guarantee and in increasing the number of women in VET. And in the broader diversity space, Wil was a presenter at the World Pride International Human Rights Conference and has worked with Building Unions from across the Asia Pacific region around queer inclusion strategies.

Over the last few years, the VTHC has made submissions to various enquiries including the Victorian Government Ministerial Taskforce on Sexual Harassment, Gender Equality Bill and Regulations and the Inquiry into Women's Economic Equity. At a Federal level, we contributed to the Respect @ Work Report.

This year, we built on that work by making various submissions around issues impacting working women including into the Fair Work Commission Sexual Harassment Cost Model and a proposed Federal Procurement framework around women apprentices and encouraging women into VET.







## Feminist Hall Tours

More than 200 women have participated in a union women's history tour of Trades Hall which commenced in June with the unveiling of our monument to Zelda D'Aprano.

In the 90 minute tour, activists learn about women who've been organising and fighting for equality for over a century, from Equal Pay activist Zelda D'Aprano, to Tailoress' strike leader Helen Robertson, to the Clerks Union's pay equality leader Muriel Heagney, and peace activist and Working Women's Centre founder Gwen Godecki.

These tours connect today's feminist activists with the history of collective struggle in union.

*Water colour drawings by a woman who recently participated in a Feminist Hall tour.*





# It's intersectional, or it's empty

National > Politics

## 'Sound familiar?': Pamphlet changes Aussie's minds on Voice vote

A pamphlet stating reasons to vote no for women's suffrage in the US has gone viral after a TikToker compared it to messaging used by the No campaign.

Brielle Burns

3 min read October 2, 2023 - 7:14PM

news.com.au

A pamphlet against women's suffrage in the 1910s has been used to criticise the No campaign – as it was featured on a viral TikTok that has swayed some vote less than two weeks out from the Voice to parliament referendum.

The pamphlet, which was shared in a video by Yes supporter and Victorian Trades Hall Council assistant secretary Wil Stracke, was originally published by the National Association in the US.

In the video, which has amassed over 500,000 views, Ms Stracke claimed there were "jaw dropping" similarities between the arguments used by those who oppose the Indigenous Voice to parliament.

*"Conservatives always reach for exactly the same play book whenever they want to oppose any change no matter how small," she said.*

Under reasons to vote no on women's suffrage, the pamphlet states:

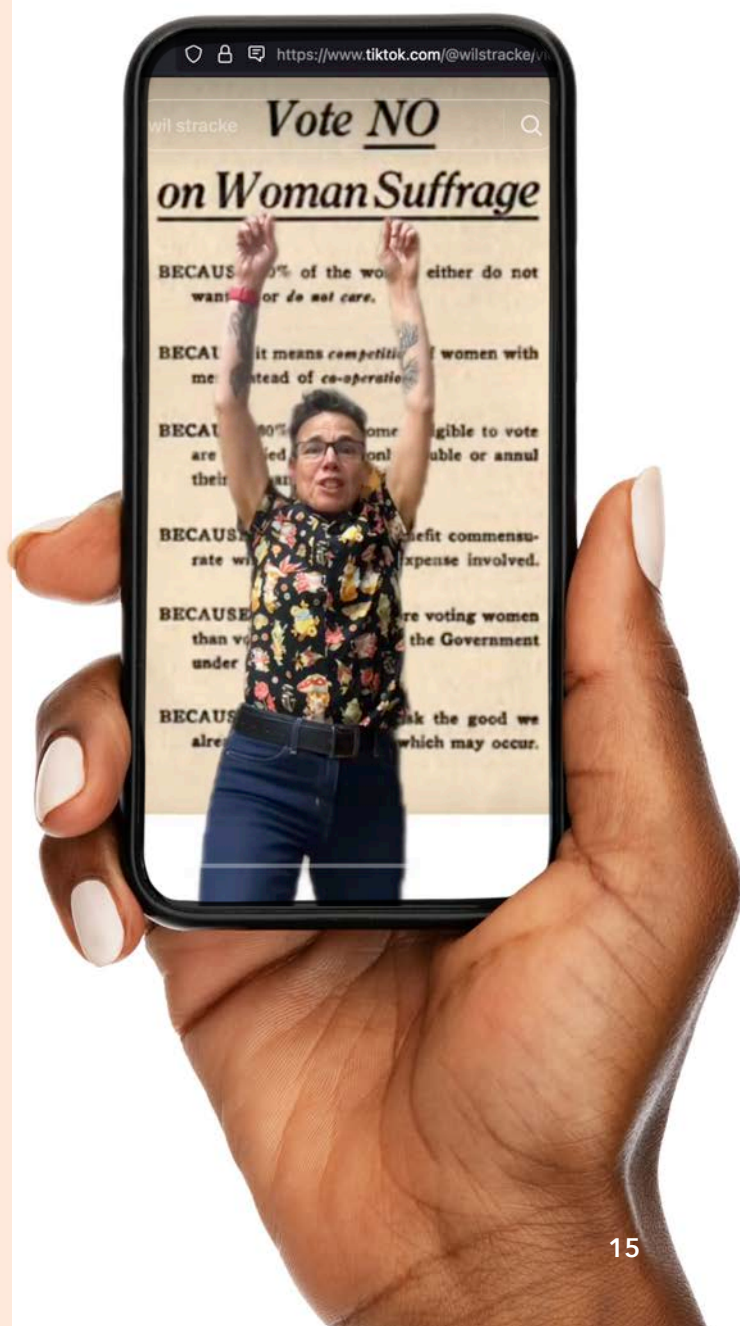
*"Because 90 per cent of the women either do not want it, or do not care... Because it means competition of women with men instead of co-operation.*

*Comparing the claims to those used by the No campaign, which labels the Voice "risky", "unknown" and "divisive", Ms Stracke said the 1910s pamphlet claimed "the majority of women didn't support it, ... it was divisive, and they said that it wouldn't have any real impact".*

*"They also said it would be far too expensive, women would be far too powerful and that it was far too risky. Any of that sound familiar?"*

In 2023 Trades Hall became a hive of activity for the "Yes" campaign for Voice. Taking the lead from our First Nations sisters, women unionists campaigned together for a Yes vote. Despite the result, we are proud to have stood in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Union women have also staunchly opposed efforts by the far-right to stir up on anti-trans sentiment. This year we joined queer activists to offer protection and support for "drag story time" events, and wrote to the Human Rights Commission arguing against the *LGB Alliance's* application for permission to ban trans women from their events.







*Clay model work in progress by artist Jennifer Mann*



*The women in construction group get a selfie with Zelda*



*Alva Geikie with Thelma Soloman's partner Maureen - who joined Zelda's second chain up in 1969 - at the opening of the Zelda statue*





# Zelda a union activist in bronze

By Edwina Byrne

It's a hot day, and some bastard arbitrator is telling you, officially, that women don't deserve to be paid as much as men. So you chain yourself to the exit of a Commonwealth building to demand the government get serious on equal pay.

That was Zelda D'Aprano in 1969.

Zelda was a polarising figure in her life, but these days her exploits – including the chain up, but also stunts like only paying 75% of the tram fare to highlight the injustice of unequal pay – have become legendary amongst union women. It is whispered around the corridors of Trades Hall that she was even the first woman unionist to start drinking with the boys at the John Curtin after work.

A working-class kid from Carlton, Zelda left school at 14 to support her family, knocking around jobs as biscuit maker, usherette, seamstress, nurse and office worker, but always a committed trade unionist. She married Charlie D'Aprano at 16 and gave birth to her daughter Leonie a year later.

When she came to work for the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union, she was shocked at the conditions inside Trades Hall. At these run-down offices in 1969, Zelda enthusiastically attended a meeting of women unionists to discuss the equal pay case

– but only one other woman, Diana Sonenberg, Secretary of the Insurance Staff Federation, turned up. Diana and Zelda spoke of their admiration for the tactics of suffragist women in the UK, and together they devised the plan for the chain-up.

At the Commonwealth building, Zelda chained herself to the doors whilst other union women held placards and led chants. A journalist who snapped her picture sneered at her – *“what do you possibly hope to achieve here? You're just one woman”*. Canonically, she replied *“Today it was me, tomorrow there will be two of us, the next day four and it will go on and on and there won't be any stopping it”*.

The media coverage of Zelda's chain-up attracted more women activists. Ten days later two striking teachers, Alva Geikie and Thelma Solomon, joined another chain-up with Zelda and together they formed the *“Women's Action Committee”*. By the 1970s they were campaigning against workplace discrimination, sexist advertising, and for abortion law reform. It went on and on... there was no stopping it.

In May 2023, Alva Geikie attended the unveiling of a statue of Zelda at Trades Hall, along with Thelma Solomon's life partner Maureen, Victorian Minister for Women Natalie Hutchins MP, historian Clare

Wright and some of the hundreds of unionists who had donated to the statue's creation. Wil Stracke, Assistant Secretary of Victorian Trades Hall Council, spoke of the significance of the figurative bronze, sculpted holding her chains defiantly:

*“This statue is more than just a tribute to an individual or even to her collective. It reminds us of our history - that we are part of a chain of women who fought for better - but also of what still needs to be done. That change is not achieved by appealing to power but by building and exercising power in collective. And that sometimes we must chain ourselves to buildings and refuse to pay full fare and be prepared to push our way in to the front bar.”*

The statue, titled *“Chain Reaction”* was crafted by local artist Jennifer Mann with support from the Victorian State Government and A Monument of One's Own, but led and chiefly funded by Victorian Unions. After witnessing the groundswell of support Clare Wright received in proposing a Zelda statue, the union movement swung into action, raising \$300,000 from unions and individual donors on top of the State Government's \$140,000. The Zelda project was enthusiastically taken up by Trades Hall as part of a wider agenda of telling union stories and teaching working class history to the next generation.

