

Union of Australian Women Newsletter



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September 2013

WHAT'S ON

Monday 2nd September
12 noon

UAW Darebin Group meeting
Northcote Town Hall meeting room

Monday 9th September
10.30 a.m. – 12.30 p.m.

UAW Organising Committee
2nd floor meeting room Ross House

Thursday 12th September
10.30 a.m. – 12.30 p.m.

UAW Book Group
2nd floor meeting room
Ross House

Monday 23rd September

UAW Film Group

Monday 30th September
& **Tuesday 1st October**

Victorian Trades Hall Choir
at 7.30 p.m.
La Mama Courthouse
349 Drummond Street Carlton
Phone: 9347 6142

*Please put the following dates in your diary –
further details in next month's newsletter*

Wednesday 16 October **UAW Pub Lunch**
12 noon onwards **Royal Oak Hotel**
North Fitzroy

*Join us to celebrate the special decade birthdays
of Anne Sgro and Amy Duncan
RSVP: phone or email office*

Saturday 19 October
11 a.m. – 2 p.m.

UAW AGM
QVWC

RU486

by Carmen Green

UAW members will remember the controversy when Tony Abbott was Health Minister over the lack of availability in Australia of the abortion drug RU486. In 1996, the Federal Health Minister had been given the power to effectively ban the importation of RU486 but in 2006 a conscience vote led by a cross party group of women MPs overturned the veto. Abbott, of course, voted in favour of retaining his veto. He has been quoted as saying that "abortion is the easy way out": see article by Tanya Plibersek: <http://www.mamamia.com.au/news/tanya-plibersek-on-ru486/>

One of Julia Gillard's last acts as Prime Minister was to sign off on cabinet approval for dramatically reducing the cost of RU486. Since 2006 RU486 had been available only very restrictively from a small number of doctors and at around \$800 was also prohibitively expensive. The Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee had agreed to list RU486 on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme earlier this year. The resulting cost was \$12 for concession card holders and \$70 for others under the PBS. Importantly more GPs will also be available to prescribe RU486.

The Sunday AGE (11 August 2013) had a disturbing article by Melinda Tankard Reist on the abortion drug RU 486. Tankard Reist claimed that recent publicity for the drug suggested that it was safe for women to use when in her opinion it was anything but safe. Her article included several case studies where women using the drug had experienced medical difficulties.

I found Tankard Reist's condemnation of RU486 very hard to believe for a variety of reasons. First she is well known to oppose abortion so it was not surprising that there was no balance in her article –all her case studies were highly negative. From August 1, both drugs have been available on the PBS. It was hard to imagine that the Health Minister Tanya Plibersek would have welcomed this if the drug was indeed as dangerous as Tankard Reist claimed. Ms Plibersek said: "No drug is without the potential for side effects....But there is a great deal of statistical evidence now internationally that show the complication rates are very low....This is about giving women more options at a very difficult time." (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 30 June 2013).

I was pleased to see that the following Sunday AGE (18 August 2013) had a number of letters to the editor criticising Tankard Reist's article. One letter was from Rita Butera, Executive Director of Women's Health Victoria who wrote that "contrary to Tankard Reist's claims, the inclusion of mifepristone (RU486) and misoprostol on the PBS represents an important milestone for women, allowing them to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and access safe and affordable abortion". Butera also said that "The World Health Organisation includes mifepristone and misoprostal in its list of essential medicines based on thorough evidence about safety." Butera concluded her letter by saying that these medicines are also widely used in Europe, the UK, the US and New Zealand. Other letter writers said that as Tankard Reist's opposition to abortion is well documented it should have been declared and that her article was full of "inaccuracies, misconceptions and misleading inferences."

Australian women are very fortunate that the drug RU 486 is now available on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and more freely available through GPs. I doubt that this would have happened under an Abbott led Federal Government.

FOR WHOM WILL WOMEN VOTE?

By Mary Owen

Mary Owen is the convener of UAW Seniors which meets regularly in Ross House to discuss issues of interest. Their last meeting was held on Thursday 15th August and Mary prepared the following paper for discussion at the meeting. Mary's paper has been abbreviated slightly for the newsletter article.

A few weeks ago I received a letter from one of our parliamentary leaders telling me that "In recent years politics has failed the Australian people. There has been too much negativity all round. There's been an erosion of trust. Negative personal politics has done much to dishonour our parliament but done nothing to address the urgent challenges facing our country, our communities and our families." And what did he want? A donation of money from me. Now another federal election is upon us. For whom? for what? shall we vote? There seems to be little difference in what is being offered by the major parties for the average voter – particularly for women facing challenges to their families.

Both parties are obsessed with growing the economy and increasing production of anything at all - no matter how damaging to our environment - which can produce a profit for the shareholders of large companies plus huge rewards for board members and chief executive officers. The Coalition parties have always been interested in promoting private industry and there is nothing wrong with this so long as all citizens share the benefits. According to Ross Gittins (The Age 17/7/13): "Since the early 1980s, we've become more overtly materialistic in our values and our political leaders have reacted by undertaking micro-economic 'reforms', emphasizing the primacy of economic growth and generally becoming more receptive to the demands of business. The result is a lot more income, but also a lot less equal distribution of that income. The people urging this greater emphasis on materialism have captured most of the benefits, while the rest of the community doesn't quite seem to have noticed what's going on."

Maybe they haven't noticed because those with the money to control most of the media have managed to put the emphasis on endless parliamentary nitpicking about the carbon tax, sabotage of parliamentary leaders, and protecting our borders from helpless people in leaky boats. The really important achievements of government such as increased funding for education and the disability care insurance scheme have had precious little attention. In the days of Gough Whitlam the ALP introduced a comprehensive Medibank scheme, free tertiary education for all who qualified and retirement funding by a compulsory levy on all incomes. Since Gough's day the gap between rich and poor has steadily widened.

According to Economics Professor Andrew Leigh (The Age, 17/7/13), the latest figures show that Australia has the ninth-highest level of inequality among 34 rich countries. The main concern of both the major parties seems to be to have no national debt. This is ridiculous. Big businesses are in debt to their shareholders. Without debt most of us could never buy a home. To achieve this aim various governments have sold essential services such as telephone, public transport, gas, electricity, water – not to mention the Commonwealth Bank and various state banks - to private industry, where the main objective is to make a profit – not provide essential services for those who need them.

Hence a vast increase in the cost of services to consumers – long before the carbon tax. There is nothing wrong with government debt if it is an investment in infrastructure to benefit future generations and there is no reason why one generation should pay all the cost. Government should be in debt to build infrastructure which will benefit future generations as well as this one. We badly need new infrastructure now to maintain our railways, ports and roads. Governments should:
provide employment, help the environment and relieve congestion on the roads by up-grading railways and extending the public transport networks
build dams and roads as did the migrants who came here after World War II
build modest housing like the old Housing Commission houses and flats (not the high rise monsters) with reasonable repayment terms.

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FOR WHOM WILL WOMEN VOTE? by Mary Owen **cont from p.3**

Stop telling us taxes are too high. Taxes, like religious tithes, are meant to provide essentials which any of us may need some day.

Instead of Whitlam's retirement levy, we now have private superannuation, subsidized by government tax concessions in proportion to income. This means that about 80 per cent of income forgone by government goes to the top 5 per cent of income-earners and women receive, on average, half the amount of superannuation which men receive. Unfortunately their medical and other living expenses are not reduced accordingly.

Instead of subsidizing overseas investment in mining and encouraging the production and use of motor cars by extending freeways, governments should be subsidizing local jobs which will reduce unemployment and environmental deterioration.

Young people may agree that something should be done to reduce carbon emissions but they need job security first. Many are opposed to refugees coming to Australia because they believe they will take jobs which they themselves need

From our own long experience, those of us who are interested in politics have found that the great majority of people, although interested in the damaging effects of carbon emissions and the plight of refugees, have more immediate concerns such as:

- employment - how can they find or maintain a job?
- how can they maintain the mortgage or rent on their home?
- how can they afford adequate food, health care, child care and education for their children? and
- how will they cope in retirement ?

What political party will best meet these needs? For whom shall we vote at the forthcoming federal elections? I suspect there will be an influx of independent candidates or people representing small reformist parties; and sorting them out on ballot papers will be a nightmare – for those of us who bother to vote. Increasing numbers of the aged and the very young are simply not voting.

We suggest IT'S TIME that political parties listened to women.

If only political leaders had consulted more with women, we might have had a disability care insurance scheme twenty years ago. I recently found a copy of such a proposal put forward by The Women's Electoral Lobby Brisbane **in 1994**. Eventually it took a female Prime Minister to push it through the Parliament – but she got little credit for that.

Women bear the major part of the burden of seeing that their children get the things they need adequately funded health care, illness prevention and quality education – primary, secondary, tertiary, TAFE **And women are at least 50 per cent of voters.**

CHILDCARE POLICIES: now a vote changer by Cath Morrison continued from page 5

As Georgina Dent, notes childcare issues are complex. *From a public policy perspective the quality of care provided needs to be maintained, childcare workers must be paid a fair wage and the cost of care must be affordable to parents. It is clear that there is some tension between achieving each of those objectives.*

The means to achieve these objectives will require additional funding from whichever party forms government after the 2013 Election but good quality accessible childcare, with greater choice and flexibility than at present, will remain of economic and social importance to all Australians.

CHILDCARE POLICIES now a vote changer.

by Cath Morrison

Making a difference! Those activist members of the UAW who have campaigned for child care in the past must be gratified that it is now a central political issue. Child care is a basic prerequisite for women's participation in the workforce and Australia's economic well being and now all political parties recognize this. This is a great achievement, yet more needs to be done to increase access to child care.

How the parties propose to tackle availability, affordability of childcare will be an important factor at the upcoming election. The National Foundation for Australian Women has just published a comprehensive report comparing the major political parties' policies. (<http://www.nfaw.org>) The listing of party policy differences below is based upon an article by Georgina Dent, writing in Women's Agenda on August 9, 2013 and includes the main highlights of policy which I have edited heavily and I hope, equitably.

AFFORDABILITY:**Labor:**

- A means tested Child Care Benefit and a non-means tested Child Care Rebate up to \$7,500 (cap frozen until 2017)
- Rebate and benefits applicable to out of hours school care

Coalition

- Proposed Productivity Commission Inquiry into childcare. Terms of reference include daycare and inhome services including nannies and au pairs .
- Ruled out means testing the Child Care Rebate

Greens

- Proposed Productivity Commission Inquiry into child care funding
- Pay all child care assistance directly to childcare centres
- Support indexation of child care assistance payments to address current high costs.

AVAILABILITY:**Labor**

- Field trials of flexible child care (including overnight and weekend care) to commence in July 2013
- A \$450million investment in out of school hours care at schools.

Coalition

- Proposed Productivity Commission Inquiry into childcare.
- Proposed to re-establish the Federal Planning and Advisory Commission to ensure that new services are approved on an as needs basis.

Greens

- financial assistance for child care centre programs that offer flexible hours and occasional care.
- Enhance flexibility by expanding the number of places in the in-home care scheme.
- Proposed Capital Grants of \$200m over 4 years for community and not-for-profit centres to access funds expand and build new centres to reduce long waiting lists.

In my opinion, the main differences between the parties are as follows:

- the Coalition is more likely to extend funding to in-home care by nannies and other carers and to remove means testing of benefits;
- Labor, which has greatly increased child care places will do more of the same, and will extend the rebate into after-school care which will be improved;
- and the Greens will want rebates paid directly to the centres rather than to the parent and improved flexibility and after school programs. *continued on page 4*

MICHELLE GRATTAN interviews CHRISTINE MILNE by Carmen Green

I was very interested to read an article by Michelle Grattan in the *Conversation* (7 August 2013). Grattan had interviewed Christine Milne, leader of the Greens on "Female Leadership, Kevin Rudd and the Greens election fight." In this newsletter article, I've focused on the discussion of women as leaders. Milne's comments, however, on political issues such as the increasing conservatism in Australian politics, the struggle the Greens face in the Federal election and their focus on issues such as refugees, climate change and the necessary transition of the economy from a resource-based economy to a new diverse brains based economy also make for interesting reading. I urge you to read the full report by Grattan in **The Conversation**: <https://theconversation.com/interview-christine-milne-on-female-leadership> and also in Women's Agenda <http://www.womensagenda.com.au/talking-about/opinions/michelle-grattan-christine-milne-on-women-in-leadership>

Given the amount of media attention given to Julia Gillard as the first Australian woman to be elected Prime Minister and the sexism she experienced, it is surprising that no other journalist has thought to interview Christine Milne before on the question of women as leaders of political parties. As the female leader of the Greens party Milne's experience of misogyny will not be anywhere near as bad as that experienced by Gillard as PM but given Australia's conservative attitudes to women in leadership roles she is certainly in a good position to give informed comments.

Grattan reported that recently Christine Milne received a tweet saying "Get out of the way Christine and leave it to the big boys". Milne said that "I just thought to myself that is so symptomatic of the certain element of the Australian population that never accepted women in leadership positions and now feel comfortable that they've got their two men back, and they're happy with that." Milne also makes the comment that "It is ironic people talked about who was the real Julia. I don't think anyone in Australia has a real insight into who the real Kevin Rudd or the real Tony Abbott are".

In the article Milne refers to the fact that since Rudd has resumed being PM, Gillard has almost disappeared from political discussion and that: "[The whole issue of women in leadership has just disappeared, as if it never existed. And now you've got a certain sense across part of the Australian population that things are back as they ought to be – the two parties are led by two men and they're out there contesting it. I just think there are women out there, people out there, who do want to see more women in politics, and more women in politics standing up for feminist ideals and the advancement of women in society generally...](#)"

I'm always interested to read the comments other readers make at the end of online articles. In the case of this article it was the comments from some of the male readers that really stood out for me. These commentators sounded quite outraged at the comment made by Christine Milne about the misogynist tweet she received. Why is it that when women complain about misogynist treatment they are often accused by men of whining and reminded of the "prejudice" that men face? Several male commentators reminded readers of the misandry that men suffer. I'm not quite sure how to sensibly discuss the vast difference between misogyny and misandry except to stress that misogyny is wide spread and has been institutionalised historically in laws and attitudes which particularly in the past have prevented women from having equality with men. Julia Gillard's experience as the first Australian Prime Minister illustrated how wide spread misogyny still is in Australia. In a largely patriarchal world where the majority of people in positions of power are still men, it is outrageous to equate misandry with misogyny.

Michelle Grattan currently has a dual role with an academic position at the University of Canberra and as associate editor (politics) and chief political correspondent at The Conversation.

NOTES FROM THE AUGUST ORGANISING COMMITTEE MEETING

by Carmen Green

The Organising Committee met on August 12th 2013 to discuss the regular UAW organizational and activist issues. Regular reports were made on UAW finances, memberships, IT, and activities in branches. The following decisions were made:

- The UAW will forward a **donation of \$200 to the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre** – this is made up of the money collected at our last coffee morning and donations to the ASRC.
- **28 members are now receiving their newsletter electronically** -15% of total members resulting in a saving on expenditure on paper, photocopying and stamps. It is also good for the environment. If you want to receive your newsletter electronically please email Cath Morrison at home at hannmorr610@yahoo.com.au
- 100 copies of the UAW's DVD "**Apron Strings and Atom Bombs**" have been delivered to the Office and are available for sale at \$15 for members and \$20 for organizations. Cath Morrison will write a letter to educational institutions likely to be interested in purchasing a copy.
- **Left Wing Ladies:** Morag Loh has finished updating LWL to 2012 and has found a professional and competitively priced printer. The UAW will now be the publisher of the new edition. Decision was made to order 200 copies at \$15.30 each and sell at \$20. Cath Morrison will include information about the history in her letter promoting the DVD. A launch will be organized. Morag was congratulated for the excellent work that she has done.
- On behalf of the UAW, Anne Sgro' had signed an online petition that WEL had organized through **Change.org to Abbott and Rudd re the sole parent payment**. The possibility of the UAW using online petitions had been discussed at earlier meetings and needs to be pursued.
- Evelyn Greig had forwarded an article from the AGE 1992 written by Suzy Freeman-Greene called "**A progress report on feminism**". Included in the article were comments (and a photo) from UAW President Anne Sgro'. The article ended with a comment from Anne: "*I love that saying women hold up half the sky. In fact, I am certain that we hold up more than half the sky*". Thanks to Ev for sending in the article.

VALE HELLEN COOKE

by Carmen Green

The recent sudden and unexpected death of Hellen Cooke – feminist, poet and peace activist – shocked and saddened countless feminists and peace activists. Hellen was a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and Convenor of Victorian WILPF. She was also a member of a number of women's groups including the Union of Australian Women and the UNAA Status of Women Committee. Just before she died she had been working with Sheila Byard on a joint presentation to the National Council of Women Victoria on "Women, Peace and Security".

The last UAW meeting Hellen attended was the UAW's July Coffee with a Focus meeting on refugees. As usual she asked an insightful question and made a generous donation to the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre.

Hellen was admired and respected by many in the numerous organisations in which she played an active role. She will be sadly missed.

UAW SOUTHERN BRANCH REPORT for meeting 17th August 2013 – Speaker: Emily Christie, Human Rights Lawyer on “Women’s rights, gender rights and Law”. by Mairi Neil

Winter chills and escaping from them, reduced our numbers this month but a dozen met at Mordialloc to hear Emily Christie, a human rights lawyer give an eloquent and passionate rundown on her work, in discrimination law. Particularly discrimination on the basis of disability, sex identity, and sexuality.

The meeting opened by Amy expressing our sadness and paying tribute to Hellen Cooke, a generous longtime supporter of Southern Branch who died suddenly a few weeks ago. Hellen’s quiet but incisive comments and committed activism will be missed, not only by the UAW but by WILFP and several other organisations.

When Emily rose to speak it was to present one of the most interesting talks we have had, leaving most of us awestruck. Working for DLA Piper Australia, a global law firm, Emily is part of a pro bono team handling cases with a public interest aspect and on behalf of people who may be too poor to go through normal legal channels.

The Human Rights Law Centre, established in 2006 with half a dozen lawyers is an NGO relying on private donations from philanthropic organisations, other law firms and private individuals with a small contribution from government. Their independence from government important because they work on making the government fulfill obligations under the various national and international laws.

There is an education component to their work as well as litigation, and they have publications plus a website with an amazing resources page. The copies of submissions under ‘Women’ include equal opportunity, decriminalization of abortion, family violence, equal pay etc. <http://www.hrlc.org.au>

The Centre does a lot of work on refugee rights responding to policies. They have also tackled Gay and Lesbian rights from the perspective of equality under the law. They do work for Amnesty International to improve Australia’s foreign policy. They monitor police powers and investigative techniques, keep abreast of UN and other peak bodies and Australia’s compliance regarding international obligations and women’s rights, especially the right to be free from violence. Emily’s work and experience covers a broad scope, she chose two areas to share with us:

1. The story of Norrie who does not identify as male or female and the fact that under the law ‘she’ can’t be protected because there are no appropriate words to describe or protect someone of non-specific sex in current gender and identity laws.
2. Changes in the law at national and international level that push boundaries and close gaps in women’s rights, particularly regarding abortion and domestic violence.

Norrie was born male in Scotland with gender dysphoria. Convinced to take ‘the cure’ of sexual reassignment surgery Norrie couldn’t identify as female either. Under Australian law after surgery a birth certificate can be changed but you couldn’t choose to be intersex - or non-specific gender. Our society has definite gender boundaries. Norrie and others have basic problems like what toilet to use, who to marry and what to put on official forms - especially since so many insist on knowing your gender even if it should be irrelevant.

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UAW SOUTHERN BRANCH REPORT for meeting 17th August 2013 –
Speaker: Emily Christie, Human Rights Lawyer on “Women’s rights,
gender rights and Law”. by Mairi Neil *continued from page 8*

Norrie applied to have non specific on ‘her’ birth certificate which the Registrar had no problem with but that decision made the news and the Attorney General intervened to insist male or female must be stated. Norrie took the decision to VCAT. Sex is not defined in any legislation - it is just taken as read and although losing the first appeal, Norrie won in the Court of Appeal. Unfortunately, this judgement has also been appealed. There will be a High Court case next year but Emily is hopeful for success because there is a groundswell of supporters for sexual diversity. There was also a change to Federal Sex Discrimination Act on August 1, 2013 to make discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status unlawful: <http://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?q=4ede53c3-38a9-48c1-9c54-207f0a04958a>

The law has to define sex by what is happening in the real world, with categories broader than male or female. Norrie’s case records the first time judges recognised that people may not fit into a predetermined understanding of what they should be. The case is important because once people are recognised in law they can be protected and services provided for them. Gay, transgender, and intersex people now have protection at federal level. There are new guidelines created for official forms like Passports, Centrelink, Medicare whereby a person’s sex is only asked if necessary, and there has to be the option of “X” (intersex) as well as male or female. Emily noted that the enrolment to vote forms have already been altered to reflect the updated law.

Australia is one of the first Western governments to take this step in law but cultural awareness will take some time. Interestingly, India and the Philippines have a cultural history of acknowledging an intersex community - with 6 million people in India identifying as intersex. Internationally Australia is ahead in laws pertaining to sex and gender diversity but not in marriage equality. Unfortunately because the section in UN Human Rights Charter still delineates marriage between male and female it is interpreted as being against same sex marriage making it difficult to cite a UN convention in any legal argument. However, the UN Committee on Human Rights regarding sexuality may be conservative but at least they are doing better on women’s rights.

International law has never been good on women’s rights, especially in the private sphere. The laws written by men focussed on the public sphere with issues such as domestic violence and abortion unaddressed. This is changing with private issues made a public responsibility mirroring changes on the domestic front in Australia.

The UN has legislation about torture and this has been used to change the rhetoric on domestic violence enabling the use of international law to protect women at home. The UN recognises that gender discrimination and violence against women is systemic. Many governments are now forced to address these issues like war crimes. A recent case in South America used international law to procure an abortion for a sick woman citing the denial would be tantamount to torture and cruel and inhumane.

<http://www.policymic.com/articles/30925/un-report-classifies-lack-of-access-to-abortion-as-torture>

In 2006, in response to well-documented patterns of abuse, a distinguished group of international human rights experts met in Yogyakarta, Indonesia to outline a set of international principles relating to sexual orientation and gender identity. The result was the Yogyakarta Principles: a universal guide to human rights which affirm binding international legal standards with which all States must comply. They promise a different future where all people born free and equal in dignity and rights can fulfill that precious birthright. http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles_en.htm *continued on page 10*

UAW SOUTHERN BRANCH REPORT for meeting 17th August 2013 –
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gender rights and Law”. By *Mairi Neil* *continued from page 9*

However because Australia does not have a Human Rights Act (one of the few who don't) individuals can't sue the government if they don't fulfill their obligations. Emily said the best tool for change is when the States do something wrong and the Federal Government wants them to stop e.g. Tasmania was the last state to decriminalise homosexuality. A man took the issue to UN and because the Federal Government makes laws to deal with external issues and obligations under international treaties they can pull the states into line and make state laws invalid. Obligations under world heritage treaties enabled the Federal Government to make Tasmania save the Franklin River from being dammed.

However, if the Federal government chooses to ignore international conventions there are no real consequences except loss of reputation and being scolded before a review board, which does not bode well if there is a change of government and Abbott is PM.

An interesting discussion followed. All present went home better informed and grateful for someone of Emily's competence and passion working to protect our human rights. Changes to our Constitution and/or establishing a Human Rights Charter are important goals to put on the UAW agenda.

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