The Working Women's Charter of 1980

The following is a transcript of panel of speakers including Hazel Armstrong, Therese O'Connell, and Grace Millar and facilitated by Sue Kedgley. The talk is introduced by Emma-Jean Kelly. It was recorded live at the National Library of New Zealand on 3 August 2022.

Transcript

Sarah Burgess: Kia ora, and welcome to the New Zealand History podcast channel, where you'll find talks on Aotearoa New Zealand history, culture and society. These talks are organised by Manatū Taonga, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage with the support of the Alexander Turnbull Library. They're recorded live either via Zoom or in person at Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, the National Library of New Zealand.

Before we get into this talk, just a quick warning that this episode does contain a few swear words.

Emma-Jean Kelly:

Kua huihui mai nei i runga i te kaupapa i tēnei wā. Ka nui te koa, ka nui te aroha. Te ngākau kia kite i a koutou. Nō reira e ōku rangatira, e hoa mā, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tātou katoa. He Pou Hītori Matua Ataata Rongo ahau, I'm the Senior Audio-Visual Historian. I'm the senior audio-visual historian, no Te Manatū Taonga, at Ministry for Culture and Heritage, ko Emma Jean Kelly tōku ingoa. Kia ora.

I'm also the new Chair of the Labour History Project, formerly…

Audience members: Yay!

Emma-Jean Kelly: Yay!

[Applause]

Emma-Jean Kelly: We've got some fans and members in the audience I think – formerly the Trade Union History Project. Many of the authors of this book have been involved with that volunteer organisation over decades and it supports the telling of history as a working people in unions, and particularly the stories which have been marginalised, silenced and ignored. So on behalf of Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, National Library and Manatū Taonga, Ministry for Culture and Heritage, we welcome you here today on this historic occasion, to listen to four of the eleven authors speak about this amazing new book, *Women Will Rise*.

I'm not going to take up much more space here today, because Sue Kedgley is going to introduce and facilitate the kōrero today. But I do want to mention that from an historian's, or herstorian's perspective, to have the feminists who were involved in developing the Working Women's Charter during the 1970s write about it themselves, is so valuable. These lawyers, activists, union workers, mums and aunties, politicians and historians collectively had and still have huge and ambitious goals, just one such example being Item 2 of the Charter: 'The elimination of all discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion, political belief, marital or parental status, sexuality or age'.

Not a modest aim and one we're still hoping to achieve today. But we would be much further away from that goal if these women had not worked so hard before us. I am personally always encouraged by their tenacity and I'm always learning more from them,

every time we speak. Finally, I want to acknowledge the passing of co-editor Gay Simpkin and the huge amount of work she and Marie Russell, sitting in the front here, put into herding these fabulous cats to complete this publication.

We now warmly welcome the panel to talk and sing to us, about the frustrations and joys of campaigning for this significant Charter, which aimed to challenge and offer hope for genuine equity for all in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ngā mihi nui kia koutou. Welcome Sue.

[applause]

Several women [singing]:

Don't be too polite girls, don't be too polite,

Show a little fight girls, show a little fight,

Don't be fearful of offending, in case you get the sack

Just recognise your value and we won't look back.

Therese O'Connell [singing]:

I sew up shirts and trousers in the clothing trade,

Since men don't do the job I can't ask to be better paid

The people at the top seldom offer something more

Unless the people underneath are walking out the door.

Several women [singing]:

Don’t be too polite girls, don’t be too polite,

Show a little fight girls, show a little fight,

Don’t be fearful of offending, in case you get the sack

Just recognise your value and we won’t look back.

Sue Hirst [singing]:

They say a man needs more to feed his children and his wife,

Well, what are the needs of a woman who leads a double working life?

When the whistle blows for knock-off it’s not her time for fun

She goes home to do the job that’s never paid and never done.

Several women [singing]:

Don’t be too afraid girls, don’t be too afraid,

We’re clearly underpaid girls, clearly underpaid,

Tho’ equal pay in principle is every woman’s right

To turn that into practice, we must show a little fight.

Sue Hirst and Therese O’Connell [singing]:

We can't afford to pay you, say the masters in their wrath

But woman says 'Just cut your coat according to the cloth'

If the economy won't stand it, then here's the answer boys,

'Cut out the wild extravagance on the new war toys'.

Several women [singing]:

All among the bull girls, all among the bull,

Keep your hearts full girls, keep your hearts full

What good is a man as a doormat, or following at heel?

It's not their balls we're after, it's a fair square deal.

Sue Kedley: Kia ora koutou. Ngā mihi nui kia koutou, ko sue Kedgley ahau, nau mai, haere mai and a very warm welcome to this Public History Talk about an extraordinarily important historical document, the 1980 Working Women's Charter. And as probably all of you know, the Charter was the brainchild of the former trade unionist, feminist and MP, Sonja Davies and she considered it and looked upon it as her most important life's work. I'm sure she would be absolutely thrilled that we were gathering here, 40 years later, to discuss the significance of it and in fact it is testimony to its enduring nature, that it is as relevant today as it was 40 years ago.

Well the struggle to get the Working Women's Charter adopted by the Federation of Labour and the New Zealand Labour Party is documented in this recently published book, entitled *Women Will Rise!: Recalling the Working Women's Charter*, edited by Gay Simpkin and Marie Russell. And I would like to make a special acknowledgement of the incredible effort that Gay and Marie put into this, getting this book published. It was a bit like, as we talked at some stage, herding cats, but we got there in the end and I think it is a real – Sonja and everyone involved in this would be thrilled with this historical book.

So we've got three wonderful speakers today who have written chapters in the book and all of them have been involved in getting the Charter adopted and they will all speak about the significance of the Charter. So Hazel Armstrong is going to trace the history of the Charter. Therese O'Connell is going to discuss the extraordinary struggle within the union movement, to get the Federation of Labour to adopt it and Grace Millar is going to give a feminist historian's perspective on the significance of the Charter, its relevance today and its unfinished business.

But first we'll hear from Hazel Armstrong. Hazel was one of those very early women's liberationists, who was a member of the 1971 Auckland University Women's Liberation Group, one of the early lawyers in New Zealand, got a law degree from Auckland University, spent several decades working on health and safety issues in the union movement. And then, I think it was in your 50s, she went off, set up her own law firm, which has been extraordinarily successful and it specialises in health, safety and ACC work.

And of course, Hazel was actively involved in getting the Charter adopted and has written a chapter in the book. Thank you, Hazel.

[Applause]

Hazel Armstrong: Thanks very much Sue, that's very nice words. Okay, so I'm just going to give you a short kind of background to the history of the Charter and I just want to thank the wonderful resources that Marie and I found, here in the library as we researched it and also in archives. So the first evidence that I could find of an actual Working Women's Charter was in the 1930s. And so that ended up in a conference in 1934, and this was supported by committees – and I just love this – committees in the North Island in Auckland, Raetihi, Whanganui, Huntly and Hamilton.

Yeah, so you just think about what were the industries in those towns. So the women at this 1934 conference created a 'Guide to Action', which is set out on page 35 of the book. And in 1936, the women had a magazine called 'Woman Today' and Marie and I found that magazine here. It broadcast their aims and I just love their aims. Peace, freedom and progress, advancement of women's rights, friendship with women of all nations, I just think they're just fine words that stand us in good stead today.

Now these working women's committees were formed around Communist women; Elsie Farrelly, who became Elsie Locke and is Keith Locke's mum. I'm sure she's got many other claims to fame – and Connie Birchfield and Rita Smith. They aimed to link women with working class organisations and I didn't get this wonderful photograph that I found from Te Ara into Marie in time, but it's a picture of the New Zealand Communist Party in 1948

and there are three women in the Communist Party picture and it's those women that I'm talking about.

So I thought I'd look up and tell you a little bit about those three women, so Rita Smith was a member of the Communist Party for 50 years. She worked full time for the party in the Auckland District. Connie Birchfield, who I think more of us know her name actually, because there's a book written about her. She was a unionist and originally a Labour woman, but she joined the Communist Party in 1933 and in 1934 was one of the people that organised that first National Women's Conference. And she's in that photograph and she chaired the first day of that conference.

Then Elsie Farrelly, as I say, Elsie Locke, she joined the Communist Party in the '30s and also worked on – because remember, she was a writer. A lot of us will know her books and she was the editor of Working Woman and she also helped organise the national conference of working women. In the book that was written about Elsie, she hitchhiked around New Zealand and set up those local branches that I told you about.

Well then the war came along and that seemed to kind of halt Charter activism, and then after the war the second Charter movement is what I'd call it, was rekindled in 1946 and the aims of that are set out on page 40 of the book. Then in 1947, Rita Smith conducted a nationwide tour for the Women's National Committee, promoting the Charter. So I'd call that say like first and second wave of Charter activism. And my analysis is that after the war there was that conservative post-war culture and if you think of McCarthyism and stuff, I think there was a real turn against that kind of activism.

It seemed to go underground, but I think that that's a cause for some research really, so I think – this is my own analysis – that Charter activism, not women's activism, Charter activism ran out of steam for two decades. There were individual campaigns which have been written about, around things like family planning, but not Charter activism as such. So then – and this is where Sue's introduction comes in – then the third wave I'd call it, was the 1970s and there was an upswing in feminism and the beginning of a new wave of Charter activism.

And as Sue did, credit has to be given to Sonja Davies, who was one of several people influenced by the Australian Working Women's Charter and I think Therese, you might be talking about that a bit are you? Yeah. This led to a Women's Convention in 1977, where Margaret Wilson presented a Charter for debate. Then – and Therese will take up this story – over the next few years, the Charter was debated within the union movement and I'm just going to tell that little story about myself. Do you mind?

I was at the Wellington Caretakers and Cleaners Union and that union, I started working there in – when did I start there – April, Easter 1976. So a lot of the women from Porirua and the Hutt caught buses to do the night shift in Wellington, you may remember that, so they were called night cleaners. So they were Pacific Island and Māori women principally and they worked at night because they had families and so that – it was a kind of a combination of the men working in the motor companies, the women doing night cleaning and then there'd be a swap over when she goes off to work.

We had to, our group, the Women's Subcommittee of the Wellington Trades Council, decided we wanted a bottom up movement, which required us to go and talk to the women. Now this was a terrifying prospect, because I was young. I was in my early 20s. I was childless at that point, so I didn't have my lovely daughter by then and I had to talk to these older, often older, Pacific Island women about the Charter, which included abortion and it was terrifying. I just [laughs] – it was terrifying, but in the end we got it through.

It did get there, but I do think it was a great campaign bottom up to – and I think that was a good thing that happened, but I'll leave that to Therese, because she's got great stories. So yeah, so then 30 years after the 1980 adoption of the Charter by the Federation of Labour, a group of us in Auckland and Wellington organised that Working Women's Seminar, which was down at St John's Church in Willis. That was in 2010 and we did this lovely little seminar really, what it was and what to do next, which Grace, you'll talk about eh?

Marie then slogged away ever since then, getting this book together, so thank you Marie.

[Applause]

Sue Kedgley: Thank you Hazel and our next speaker is Therese O'Connell and she's another early women's liberationist, who was the first president of the Wellington Women's Liberation Front. I think that was 1970?

Therese O'Connell: It was.

Sue Kedgley: It was 1970, yeah, a few years ago. She went on to work in the Clerical Worker's Union, the Wellington Trades Council. She was active in the campaign for the Working Women's Charter and she's been active in fact in the union movement and many, many other social justice movements for the rest of her life.

[Applause]

Therese O'Connell: Well thank you Sue and thank you Emma and Kate for organising this. I think it is great. Even though people think I'm a very bold woman, I've actually been terrified of public speaking from my early days of doing so, but it never stopped me doing it, so isn't that interesting? Singing is much more preferable. Anyway, kia ora koutou katoa and thank you for coming to hear about our herstory, which has been our work and our passion really. The chapter that I wrote is actually very personal.

I'm not an academic or a historian and so when I started to write it, which was just after the deaths of both my parents and I was reflecting on what had brought me to this point at that time, which was at that stage probably in my early 60s and I thought what brought me to be committed to social justice, women's liberation, activism? I realised of course, my cultural ancestry, Irish, Scots and Polish, all colonised peoples; my religious – guess what? Yeah and now recovering, let me say.

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: And my working-class background all set me up for being involved basically and along with being one of five girls and one boy – we never forget him, our

darling – a household that viewed the world through women's eyes basically. It was a great set up really. I recommend it to people having children, have more women than boys. Well, maybe it's changed now. I shouldn't start saying that sort of shit. Anyway…

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: …so for me always the personal is political and what happens in the workplace and public life cannot be separated from what happens at home and you. Of course for many years as us workers within the Trade Union movement and with anything else, you're always told to keep the personal out, you know, that suddenly being at work you were supposed to be a different person. What bullshit and thank God now, we don't do that so much anymore. So what has happened beforehand, even if you weren't aware of it, women's history being so hidden and youth believing you are the first.

You know, we really thought we were the first, so I actually first saw the Charter in early 1976, when I visited my sister Bernadette – are you still guessing the religion…

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: …in Melbourne and I visited the Working Women's Centre there in Melbourne. It was the same year that Sonja Davies also picked it up from her travels. I think hers were in Israel and in England.

Female voice: Yeah.

Therese O'Connell: So as Hazel told you, the Charter was developed from the 1930s and the mid-1970s was the new iteration basically, so a new phase of organising women in unions began. For us I think probably, well I take it from my perspective, I started work in the Clerical Workers Union in 1975. I went in as a women's liberationist and I feel that for me, the years 1976 to about 1981 were the most intense Charter movement and as I said, I can still feel my heart beating when I say this. [Laughs] It's really interesting.

Writing this chapter was like – I don't think I could say PTSD, but actually I'm sure my blood pressure was raised every time, because I'd start getting into it and I'd be thinking those fucking bastards – ooh, I mean excuse me…

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: …and I'm like oh my God, is this really good for your health doing all this bloody looking backwards? But anyway, I did it. Anyway, what am I saying? So in that period I think what we did was we built the women's movement within the Trade Union movement and we were many, many, many women doing that. My focus at that time was on what was called the Wellington Clerical Workers Union, but of course our area was Taranaki, across to Hawkes Bay, down to Nelson and Marlborough and of course once we started in this movement, we also started to connect to women throughout the whole country.

So I was an organiser, an education organiser, campaigner and I was also involved in the Working Women's Alliance, so I'm not going to go into great detail about the Working Women's Alliance today. Get the book, because I've written a lot more about it in there

and I think that if it wasn't – the bulk of the work that was done for the Charter was done from a number of organisations. It was Sonja with the Shoppies Union and the Working Women's Council, which she set up and it was the Clerical Workers Union, Working Women's Alliance and then many individual women in other unions who gradually built that up.

So I was also – so in the process of writing, I was also cleaning up my parent's papers. They weren't hoarders, but they never threw anything out and if some of you know the parents, or had parents who went through the Depression, you would understand that. My father – they still had the beautiful leaflet for the first oven that they bought in 1959…

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: …and it was in pristine condition. When my mother, in 2000 and – she died in 2019 – in 2007 realised that she actually needed a new oven, having bought it in 1959 and the guys from the same company came up and I wanted to give them the leaflet, because I thought it was extraordinary. Dad didn't want me to give it away. I had to photocopy it.

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: He liked the evidence that he had bought it then. Anyway, it's not about that. It's the fact that my mother, well our mother, my sister Claire's here today. Your daughter's here. I've got a sister [laughs] and her name is Claire, so that would give you another indication. But anyway, mum kept all her darlings' letters. What a great

researcher she would have been and it was an amazing and fantastic resource and I'm really glad that I thought that I needed to educate my parents, because I wrote letters telling them about what the right and correct and thing should be and what was happening in my life and in the life of the Trade Union movement.

My mum had actually been a member of the Clerical Union. We didn't know that until I was a union organiser and she still had her very pristine card, because the union officials would come in after union – in those days compulsory unionism was introduced. They'd come up to Taranaki, signed everyone up. Mum signed up willingly. She came from a family who believed in such things as unions and she never saw an official again after that. But she had that again, very pristine card.

So anyway, I kept my diaries – nothing salacious in them, which is a pity…

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: …just notes on meetings that I had been to and here's one that I found. This is a note that a meeting – it shows you the process and the building our women's movement, so in the note I discovered I have – what worried the Trade Union movement, or the men of the Trade Union movement, were that the women were strategizing. Well we were and if you read that strategy – again, it's in the book – you'll see how thorough it is. It's a very socialist, communist analysis I would say.

Therese O'Connell: You could tell [laughs] – you can tell what we were up about, what we were on about. Then Hazel and Dale Little and I spent months, quiet discussion without

anyone else listening in, to developing a proposal for a Women's Committee, as a vehicle to better organise women in the Trade Union movement and advance policies sympathetic to women as well. So I was going to tell you – oh my diary, okay, that comes up later. So in May 1978, at the Federation of Labour Conference, the Shoppies, otherwise known as the Wellington, Taranaki, Marlborough et cetera Shop Employees Union – actually it might have been the New Zealand Shoppies Association – whatever.

Anyway, the Shoppies put up the Charter for the first time. It didn't quite get past the powerful, all-male policy committee, but Sonja moved an amendment which passed and that was that the matters contained in the 15 points of the Charter be referred to affiliated unions and District Trades Council and they be asked to include them on agendas for seminars. Now that amendment was a victory of Sonja's patience and cunning, her ability. This was our challenge and we were determined to win it.

Something that showed us that we had a possibility of it was that at that same conference, Sonja was elected to the FOL's National Executive, as the first woman member in a popular choice. So that was 1978, not that long ago for some of us and it is amazing to think that they were firsts in that time. So in 1979, in my diary I found a list [laughs] – in my 1979 diary, I found a list of actions, dramatically entitled by myself, Issues At Stake…

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: …Where Forces Lie. It's always good to I think head up a list of jobs that you have to do with a determining prospect, so I had (1) Get hold of Hazel Armstrong

within the next two days. Get list of people at seminar. Show her the report. (2) Ring up people before the 13th or 14th of February. Chat them up. See if their union has done anything. See if they are interested in another meeting early March. (3) Finish off report. Send off to the people who went to the seminar, different unions, other Trades Councils, before the 13th or 14th of February.

(4) Arrange meeting with Christine Gillespie, for Wednesday the 14th of February, to have another look at report and formulate recommendations for Trades Council and Women's Subcommittee. Actually I just looked at that date, the 14th of February I think most people think of it as Valentine's Day don't they?

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: Wouldn't have even thought about that. I mean really, it was an organising to do. (5) Send the report to Trades Council in time for March Management Committee. Talk up friendlies, George Goddard, Dave Morgan, John Slater, Sonja Davies, Ken Douglas – with a couple of question marks after it.

[Laughter]

Therese O'Connell: (6) Photocopy Working Women's Charter, four for Dale. So obviously at this stage you can see we were absolutely in the throes of this sort of organisation, the process of organisation that most of you in this room have probably been involved with in something or another. It just doesn't happen by magic does it? It takes things like, as Hazel said, the Charter for us was a huge thing to take out, because we had to – the issue of

things like abortion was the hottest things and of course what we had to get over was the fact that a lot of the male union officials – and none of them were Catholic – they were confused by my name and my politics – but at the same time, they believed that the working people would not be interested in those issues. In fact they thought it would alienate people. They didn't want anything to alienate people from unions and our own personal experience was that that wasn't true. It was union officials who were concerned about that, not the members of the union, not the workers, because they lived the life of being a woman, working women. They weren't being philosophical about it.

So – how long am I going Marie, am I overdoing? [Laughs] So the book actually has great detail and resources for people. I pointed out in my chapter quite a lot of the arguments that were held against it and what we had to do. We did have to strategize constantly and we did it and at the time, we sometimes had envied the Trade Union movement in Australia, because they got their Working Women's Charter passed as policy almost immediately. But actually, the difficulties that we encountered really made us stronger and more determined.

If we hadn't had that, it wasn't just a case of getting the numbers and I think that is what we brought to the whole thing. It wasn't a numbers game, a power game. We really believed utterly in that the working people must run their organisations, not union officials and we used it I think to – the time to delve deeper into our own unions, into the rank and file membership. We plotted, we planned, we strategized, we conducted a very thorough campaign.

The level of paranoia amongst some union officials was high, as the results of women organising came to bear fruit. Women were getting more involved and that's where the singing came in, because very often in Wellington we used the choir that we formed in the Trades Council to build our own confidence. At first it was quite weird for many people I think, because they thought to themselves oh my God, we don't come from a culture of singing. Well some of us did and [laughs] it was – and I think everyone grew to love it. Everyone grew to love that sense of solidarity that comes from singing together. Anyway.

So there's a lot of material in the book. I think it's absolutely fascinating and – well I think it's fascinating. [Laughs] Of course, isn't that strange how much of your own life you find fascinating…

[Unclear]

Therese O'Connell: …but I think that whole thing of working together built us – and certainly I think made a huge change when I think about it. When you think about how the number of women got involved in unions and women organise and so forth, it wasn't just women. There were many others, there were many men who were involved as well – one who's here today as well, Peter Franks and there'll be more of, who are really intimately involved in this struggle. So I think it's important not to focus on the individuals all the time, but to recognise that it is many, many women and men who make this happen, that it doesn't happen by these modern days of influencers or celebrities.

But it happens because determined people – and often in this case they were socialist women – who wanted to change the world and this is a way of doing it. So there were

actually difficult times and hard times – and my blood pressure's slowly coming down now as I know I'm coming to the end – but actually they were also very golden times, because we were very committed and we worked together. Isn't that a lovely thing to do, really, knowing that you're part of a group of people who are trying to make a difference? So are we going to keep on trying? Thanks for your listening.

[Applause]

Sue Kedgley: Thanks so much Therese and of course when it was, after those years of struggle, when it was finally adopted, first by the Federation of Labour and then by the Labour Party, it was really hailed and seen as a great victory for women and particularly working women, right around New Zealand. So Grace Millar is a feminist, a unionist and an historian who's a policy advisor with the Public Service Association. She's going to look back 40 years later at the significance of the Charter and its relevance today and some of the lessons to learn from it and the unfinished business. Thank you.

[Applause]

Grace Millar: Kia ora koutou. Hearing about the Working Women's Charter and the struggle to get it adopted is like looking at a bomb crater. You can see the remains of structures that had been and you can see the destruction and you can see the new life that has grown since. When asked to reflect about the significance of the Charter today, I can feel the pull of two different narratives. I could look back at the feminist movement and the situation working women were in in 1980 and point out how much better things are now.

There have been significant gains in the fights for equal pay and the provision of quality early childhoodd education. The feminist movement itself has also changed. Sex workers are not mentioned in the Working Women's Charter but, after a long fight, their work was decriminalised. Or I could write about how much we've lost. Any decrease in the pay gap during the 1990s was a result of men's wages falling, not women's wages growing. The phrase saying total wage plus other benefits seems quaint and alien from my working life.

The ability of feminists of the 1970s to put together a list of demands, fight for them and win, also belongs to a different time. But I do not want to tell either of those stories. Doing justice to past struggles requires resisting simplistic narratives, of either triumph or despair. Looking back at the demands – and what I'm going to focus today is talking about some of the successes and otherwise of the demands of the Charter – it's a bit of a bittersweet experience. There's a real uneven level of success and even where there is success, there is so much further to go.

We do have parental leave now. The maximum amount that it is paid out at is $660 a week. Meanwhile, the maximum of ACC is over $2000 a week. But the key question I want to ask is the uneven nature of the success. Some of these demands we've seen much more success than others. Why is that? What can we learn about making feminist changes in society, from the way some demands seem as urgent as they were in 1980? Some of been sites of state victories and some seem even further away.

I think the demand for childcare is the demand that has seen the most progress. To understand how successful it has been, it is necessary to understand how terrible things

were in 1970. It was almost impossible to purchase childcare in a formal setting at that point. Because of this, the Dunedin Collective for Women set up a childcare centre as a feminist act. Early childhood education is now widely available and three- and four-year old's get 20 free hours per week.

There is still much work to be done. The sector is underfunded and for-profit centres are funded in a way that Kōhanga Reo is not – and obviously for most people, 20 hours free child care is not enough. However, there is widespread availability of childcare by qualified teachers, that are at least partially government funded. That's a huge victory. The work of NZEI in fighting for pay equity and training for early childhood education teachers has been invaluable. The Charter's expression and the demand for pay equity, the same total wage plus other benefits, harks back to a very different employment situation and the fight for pay equity has continued over decades and is far from won, but this past decade, since this book started its journey, has been one of real victories. The Service and Food Workers Union, now E Tū and Kristine Bartlett, took her aged care provider to Court – the aged care provider she was working at – to Court and won the ability to compare her work to those of men in male-dominated industries. The victory in Court and the negotiation that follows has seen an incredible increase in pay equity victories and has made a real impact to women's wages.

For example, the latest – and there's been a series of negotiations and settlements and comparisons, both of processes being set up and principles – the latest settlement for social workers, or people who are doing work that is like social work, in private, in non-government organisations, the settlement which is in the process of going through at the

moment will see people's wages, salaries, increase by $20,000 to $40,000. That's the level of the victory and it's also the level at which people were underpaid.

However, it's been a long journey. The first equal pay victory was in 1960, when women won the right for equal pay for the same work in the public service. There have been many victories, but there's always a danger of sinking back. The Care and Support Settlement, so this is the settlement for the industry that Kristine Bartlett was in, was a legislated one and they've just extended the legislation, which saw at a time of seven per cent inflation, the care and supporter workers got a three per cent pay increase and they're back to being $1.20 above the minimum wage and now have to begin a whole new pay equity process. So it's very easy for any gains to be lost.

Again, [laughs] one of the nice things about how long it's taken to do this book is that there had to be revision due to being overtaken by events. When I began writing this afterword, the legal situation about abortion was the same as it had been in 1918. For decades feminists had met, written, protested and tried to change a terrible law and seemed to get nowhere. But in fact that work mattered and on 18 March 2020, the Abortion Legislation Act passed its third reading and five days later, abortion was no longer covered by the Crimes Act.

Audience members: Hoorah.

[Applause]

Grace Millar: So timing revealed how urgent the situation had become. Unnecessary travel for abortion would have caused so much more harm under lockdown conditions that came in just a few days later. Again, there is more to be done. At the end of 2020, there were still no abortion services in South Auckland and international students are required to buy health insurance – well when there were international students and who knows, hopefully the situation will change when they return – they're required to buy health insurance that did not require access to abortion, which left some students in really, really horrible and difficult situations.

Again, we can be reminded about how fragile our gains were. Earlier this month 1000 people marched, not very far from here, up to the American Embassy to show their solidarity for attacks on abortion rights in America. If nothing else, while the situation is terrible, that mobilisation shows that people are prepared to continue to fight.

But alongside these kinds of quite significant victories, there are areas where things have got worse. Demand 9, for equal access to social security, our social security system is unimaginably worse than it was in 1980, thanks to the 1991 cuts and those basic provisions about – which lead to unequal access to social security, like the provision for relationships and the nature of marriage, are no longer – are still there, despite the best work of the Welfare Advisory Committee. The demand for a shorter week is something that is as relevant now as it ever was and in fact, since 1980, the hours of work have got longer.

Other demands are more complicated and would not be made in the same way now. A lot of the union movements fears about flexible work have come true. Work is more flexible than 40 years ago, more flexible for employers. Flexibility for employers means instability, insecurity and precarity for workers and again, that right to work for everyone is no more true now than it is before – you know, the unemployment rate announced today and the way that that is considered baked into society still continues.

There have been important victories by organised workers in fast food outlets, that have led them to receiving more secure work, but at the same time new industries have been casualised. The dream of work, organised around worker's needs, is further away now than it was in 1980.

The relative success and continued campaigning around pay equity and child care shows how important unions are and have been, as a site of feminist struggle and winning feminist demands. The Charter was most effective when women were able to organise and make demands in their workplaces.

The work done by Charter proponents within the union movement built structures to support further struggles. Despite massive attacks on union movements in the last 30 years, they're still the most organised and effective way for women to demand for more. The demands that have been fought by unions in workplaces have seen the greatest advancement for feminist causes.

The Charter, its successes and failures, demonstrate that feminist movements exist in a particular historical context. The demands of the Working Women's Charter treated the

Award system like solid ground to build upon. They had every reason to. The system had been in place for 80 years. Now an almost entirely individualised and very unstable system of work seems just as natural. Feminist movements and feminist demands cannot exist outside of the time and place in which they're created. Feminism doesn't exist and isn't an ideal in the ether. It is created by women who live in the world. In the end there is no tension between what we've lost and what we've won, because they can't both come out of the complicated history of the last 40 years.

What would a Charter look like today? Would it be worthwhile? One of the reasons that this book is so important is it makes the role of Trade Unions and the Women's Liberation Movement visible. There are so many working women, amazing working women feminists of all ages. Imagine what we could do if we articulated a set of feminist demands for union and workplaces.

A Charter for the 2020s would have to start afresh. There is every impetus to do so. The pandemic has made visible much of what feminists have been arguing for years, about the necessity for undervalued and unpaid care in labour. The Award system is baked into every part of the Working Women's Charter and we need to start from where we are now, not where we were then. But everything that the Charter stood to solve is still a problem. Work that is being done by women is still undervalued. Women still have to do the majority of the unpaid labour. Work is still organised as if that unpaid labour does not exist and we still do not have the right to full bodily autonomy. The question is, what are the next steps?

There are two very important lessons I think to take from this. One is that there is no final victory. There is no stage where you can say, oh yes, we have achieved that. We have to keep fighting, because we will win some things and lose some other things. But the second is the question of the next steps and what the Charter could do now is not a question that any one person can answer usefully.

Any good answer would have to be developed collectively. What I think the story of the Charter tells us is that articulating collective strategy for a better world for working women has benefits beyond those that are easily foreseeable and the power of making a demand and going out there and changing and trying to change people's minds. I think that that – a lot of those details are tied into these particular powerful historical circumstances, but the power of making a demand and trying to change people's minds is not.

[Applause]

Sue Kedgley: Well thank you so much to our three very inspiring speakers and it shows that the Charter was not only this incredibly important historical document, but it's like a sort of milestone where you can measure where – and of course it inspired generations of women – but where we have come today and I think Grace, that was a fabulous recounting of the unfinished business that remains before us. So to end, we're now going to invite everyone to join in singing the closing song, Never Turning Back.

Several women [singing]:

We’re gonna keep on walking forward

Keep on walking forward

Keep on walking forward

Never turning back, never turning back

We’re gonna keep on singing loudly

Keep on singing loudly

Keep on singing loudly

Never turning back, never turning back.

We’re gonna keep on loving boldly

Keep on loving boldly

Keep on loving boldly

Never turning back, never turning back

We’re going to reach across our borders,

Reach across our borders,

Reach across our borders,

Never turning back, never turning back

We’re gonna work the change together

Work for change together

Work for change together

Never turning back, never turning back

We’re gonna keep on walking forward

Keep on walking forward

Keep on walking forward

Never turning back never turning back.

Sarah Burgess: Thanks for listening to this New Zealand history podcast from Manatū Taonga. Don’t forget to subscribe. And if you’re looking for other content about New Zealand history, check out earlier talks in the series. You can find them on your favourite podcast channels. Just search for New Zealand history. Mā te wā.