

May Day (1st May) is the International Workers Day.

This year, we pay tribute to women workers. Women workers have many problems — their wages are often very low, they have to look after their families after work. But women have a proud history in the struggle for workers rights. On this page we look at women

workers and their role in trade unions.

GRASSROOTS pays tribute to . . .



Women take the lead

SOUTH African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) recently started organising at Continental China. In this factory 70% of the workers are women, but the men and women do the same jobs.

Last month, the workers at Continental China went on strike. We spoke to Albert, a SAAWU organiser. "The women were the strongest in the strike. Before, they used to sit in groups at the back of union meetings. They spoke amongst themselves and then one woman would come to speak for the group. But in the strike, the women came right to the front and gave the lead. Now, when we have union issues to discuss with the workers, it is the women who have suggestions."

But the women still have some problems. For example, they often find it hard to come to meetings.

"During the strike, the children came with the mothers. One woman told me the other day, that she has worked for Continental China for 10 years. She is now 23 and has two children. She started work as a child herself, only 13 years old."

SAAWU won a big victory at Continental China. The union still has battles to fight with the Continental China bosses. They hope to reach an agreement about women workers maternity rights.

SAAWU won a maternity agreement at Johnson and Johnson in East London.

This agreement gave women the right to time off work for medical treatment during their pregnancy. Women are guaranteed their jobs back after maternity leave. Women are also allowed time to breast feed their babies for the first three months.



Women often have two jobs - keeping a family and making profits for the boss.



"A women's place is in her Union. . ."



The lowest paid and most insecure jobs.

WOMEN WORKERS

Women "best members"

JUNE ESSAU is an organiser for the Retail and Allied Workers Union (RAWU). Grassroots spoke to her about her work.

"Before I started organising for RAWU, I used to organise for Food and Canning Workers Union from inside different factories.

In all of these factories I found women difficult to organise. But, once they are organised, they are the best union members. When problems started, it was the women who started speaking and they were the first to down tools. They were so militant and strong. They could not be broken."

Grassroots: Why is it difficult to organise women?

June: Men are much more open to organisation. The women are very hesitant. They often have an excuse when it is time for a meeting - church meetings, TV programmes and husbands and children.

Sometimes I find that the women agree with me, but say I must speak to their husband. I find it easier to organise women if we have area meetings, so I can meet the family and they can hear what is being discussed. After these area meetings, the men are never hostile.

If the union organises a day workshop, it is sometimes difficult for the women workers. But some of them bring their children with them. Even some

have brought their husbands along too.

Grassroots: What are your experiences of being a woman organiser?

June: I have a lot of support from the other organisers in the union. We discuss and decide on work together.

In the factories, the workers both men and women think I am a lightie when I approach them because I am short. But when I speak about the union, they listen. Some of the men are only interested in taking you out, but others are interested in what the union can do for them.

Recently I have started to organise in a new area. Other union organisers have tried to go to the hostel before, but the security guard will not let them in. But I can go into the hostel and hold meetings - maybe that's because I am a woman.

One of my problems is my two children. They live in Worcester with my mother and father. I find it sad not to have my children with me.

They were with me for a month last year. I took them with me to the office and organising. They enjoyed it. But for me, it made my work even more demanding.

I want them with me. But children are a shared responsibility and there is no father to share the load. I cannot cope with them and my work.

Contraception by force

IN the clothing industry 90% of the workers are women. Many of the women are scared of the union. But they are learning to organise, and build CLOWU.

Zubeida Jaffer is the general secretary of the Clothing Workers Union (CLOWU). Grassroots spoke to her about organising women workers in the clothing factories of Cape Town. "The first problem is the family. It is difficult for women to get to meetings at night. Many

of the young women are single mothers, and find it difficult to leave their children for meetings.

"If the worker is married, I find that you have to speak to the man too. If you explain to them about the union, they will support their women. We have to educate and politicise the men as well.

"Another problem is pressure on women not to have children. The bosses are against pregnancy, because they want a stable workforce.

"Many factories force women to use contraception. Some have a factory nurse so you can get the kind of contraceptive you want. But they do not educate the workers about the dangers of the injection, so women think it is the easiest and the safest.

"CLOWU has tried to educate workers about these matters and to get them to understand their rights to proper medical treatment.

The situation with maternity rights is very terrible. If you fall pregnant now, you lose your job. It is another way to retrench workers. The workers can get maternity benefits, but they do not know how to apply.

"CLOWU has not negotiated any agreements and it is difficult for us to do anything now because of the recession. But it is important that workers understand their rights. And we will help them fight for those rights.