

“Many Industrial Troubles Are Due to the Presence of Female Labour”: The Women Teachers Guild in South Australia, 1937–42¹

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In August 1937 more than 600 women teachers resigned from the South Australian Public Teachers Union and formed the Women Teachers Guild. The breakaway was the culmination of more than two years' intense dissatisfaction arising from unequal representation of men and women on the Union Council and from other matters. For several years afterward the relationship between the two organizations could only be described as acrimonious as they traded blows in their respective publications and in the Industrial Court. From the late 1940s cooperation in salary matters gradually healed the breach and the two organizations amalgamated in 1951 to form the South Australian Institute of Teachers.

This article reviews the 1937 breakaway and the Guild's major challenges during its first five years, taking up recent invitations to do research on women teachers in unions.² Although the Women Teachers Guild has not been thoroughly investigated for some years, several studies of women teachers' organizations show how women teachers resisted male domination and sought to forge careers as teachers.³ Mary Kinnear's study of the Winnipeg Women

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²Wayne J. Urban, “New Directions in the Historical Study of Teacher Unionism,” *Historical Studies in Education* 2 (1990): 1–15; Andrew Spaul, “Fields of Disappointment: The Writing of Teacher Union History in Canada,” *Historical Studies in Education* 3 (1991): 21–47; Cecilia Reynolds and Harry Smaller, “Ontario School Teachers: A Gendered View of the 1930s,” *Historical Studies in Education* 6, no. 3 [Special Issue] (1994): 151–69.

³B. K. Hyams, “The Battle of the Sexes in Teachers' Organisations: A South Australian Episode,” *ANZTES Journal* 3 (1974): 36–45; Adrian Vicary, “The Doctrinal and Strategic Problems of the South Australian Institute of Teachers” (M.A. thesis, University of Adelaide, 1982); see also Alison Oram, “‘Sex Antagonism’ in the Teaching Profession: The Equal Pay Issue 1914–1929,” *History of Education Review* 14 (1985): 36–46; Cherry Collins, “Regaining the Past for the Present: The Legacy of the Chicago Teachers' Federation,” *History of Education Review* 13 (1984): 43–55; Harry Smaller, “‘A Room of One's Own’: The Early Years of the Toronto Women Teachers' Association,” in

Teachers' Local provides revealing parallels with the Guild. Salary issues were at the heart of both groups' decisions to secede from male-dominated organizations, as were improvement of status and working conditions.⁴

A study of the Women Teachers Guild is a rich resource of South Australian women teachers' opinions about their career goals and aspirations. The Guild's monthly publication, the *Guild Chronicle*, is a rare example of women teachers writing for women teachers. Besides reports on meetings and industrial issues, there were articles about classroom practice and general-interest features. The Guild also had direct access to the Minister and the Director of Education, and records of a few meticulously detailed deputations appear in the Education Department's correspondence files. Recording the candid opinions of various interest groups as they argued their cases, these deputations expose significant differences and tensions among women teachers as well as the conflict between the male-dominated Union and the Guild.

Few studies have analyzed the internal groupings and divisions, struggles and conflicts integral to the life of any association. In Australia, sectionalism and fragmentation have been cited as the major sources of internal conflict in teacher unions. In fact, the secession of women teachers to form the Women Teachers Guild has been seen as the outcome of sectional antagonism.⁵ However, inclusion of gender with factors such as age, teaching experience, and certification, opens new possibilities for understanding gender relations, as Spaul, Urban, Reynolds, and Smaller suggest. This article uses a case study in teacher unionism to examine differences both between and within gender groups in order to contribute to both feminist and teacher union history.

BREAKAWAY AND FORMATION OF THE WOMEN TEACHERS GUILD

In many ways the experiences of South Australian women teachers were no different from those of their colleagues in other states and overseas. The South Australian Public Teachers Union was formed in 1896 and for the first few years all affiliated associations were mixed and based on rank or geographic location. In 1904, women teachers in city schools formed the Women

Gender and Education in Ontario, ed. Ruby Heap and Alison Prentice (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1991), 105–17; Marjorie R. Theobald, "Women Teachers' Quest for Salary Justice in Victoria's Registered Schools, 1915–1946," in *Melbourne Studies in Education*, ed. Imelda Palmer (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1983), 1–43.

⁴Mary Kinnear, "'Mostly for the Male Members': Teaching in Winnipeg, 1933–1966," *Historical Studies in Education* 6 (1994): 1–20.

⁵Hyams, "Battle of the Sexes," 37; B. Bessant and A. D. Spaul, *Teachers in Conflict* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1972), 23–51.

Assistants Association to protect the interests of women teachers and to campaign for equal pay. In 1906 this association changed its name to the Women Teachers Association and broadened its membership to include all women teachers. The women soon realized that equal pay was a distant goal and in the early years concentrated on achieving salary increases for the lowest-paid country teachers.⁶ However, their attempts to advance women teachers' interests in general were thwarted by the inadequacy of their representation on the Union Council, the Union's major decision-making body, which adopted the tactic of providing the appearance but not the substance of action where women's concerns were at issue. Even though there were several reorganizations, women teachers were unable to displace the male teachers' hegemony in union matters during the period 1904-37.⁷

In the early twentieth century Australian teachers' unions won access to their states' arbitration systems and were able to negotiate salary increases in the 1920s. Although in other teachers' unions access to arbitration deterred groups from breaking away, in South Australia it ultimately had the opposite effect. Having gained access to the Industrial Court, South Australian teachers achieved salary increases in 1926, with a set ratio of 4:5 for women's salaries vis-à-vis those of men. The Women Teachers Association, which had always been ambivalent about the benefits of negotiating salaries through the arbitration system, passed a motion approving these salaries "for the present."⁸

The depth of antagonism between men and women teachers was twice revealed in 1930 by the Union's president, Peter Corry. In January, his speech in the Equal Pay debate at the Australian Teachers Federation Conference was almost inaudible because of the interjections of women delegates. His statements indicated lines of division that ran much deeper than sectional conflict.

The proper place for women is in the home.

⁶*Education Gazette* 20 (1904): 72; *Register*, 7 May 1915: 1; Smaller, "Room of One's Own," 109-10; Kinnear, "Mostly for the Male Members," 7; Oram, "Sex Antagonism in the Teaching Profession," 36-38; Anne Gray, "Crying in the Wilderness? Equal Pay for Women Teachers 1919-1939" (paper presented at the ANZHES/CHEA Conference, Melbourne, December 1993).

⁷*Register*, 7 May 1915: 1; 8 May 1915: 13; 10 May 1915: 10; Hyams, "Battle of the Sexes," 38; women teachers in Victoria suffered similarly. See Andrew Spaul, "Invoking Ghosts From the Past: The Formation of the Victorian Teachers' Union, Australia, 1916-1926," *Historical Studies in Education* 5 (1993): 111-15.

⁸*SA Teachers Journal* 10, no. 2 (1925): 1068; Andrew Spaul, "The State and the Formation and Growth of Australian Teachers' Unions," *History of Education Review* 15 (1986): 45.

I believe in equal pay because this would get rid of many women in industry. Many industrial troubles are due to the presence of female labour.⁹

Later that year it was proposed that teachers would be forced to accept salary cuts because of the Depression. At the Union's annual conference women teachers yet again demanded more representation on the Union Council so they could participate in anticipated salary negotiations. During this debate President Corry expressed deep-seated fears about women's presence in the Union. "The men have been afraid for many years that some day the women would arise in their might, use their numbers and utterly swamp them." Corry adamantly opposed equal representation of women on Union Council and on the Union's Salaries Committee, which prepared the salaries' cases. The Male Assistants Association strongly supported him and that support, along with his excellent debating skills and knowledge of meeting procedure, was a crucial factor in blocking women's representation on the Salaries Committee, which negotiated a 15 percent reduction in teachers' salaries in 1930.¹⁰

In the mid-1930s the Union re-entered the Industrial Court to restore salaries to pre-Depression levels. South Australian women teachers were devastated when in 1935 Justice Kelly set their salaries at 62.5 percent of the male rate! Everywhere else the 4:5 ratio had been generally accepted. Many women teachers were convinced their case had not received adequate Union support in the Court and wanted to negotiate salaries directly with the Education Department. They were well aware of the attitude of the Union's principal witness, Peter Corry, toward them. Phebe Watson and Jessaline Cooper, witnesses for the women teachers in this case, subsequently became leaders in the Women Teachers Guild.¹¹

Women teachers must have been contemplating and preparing for separation from the end of the disastrous salaries' case in 1935. The breakaway was narrowly averted in mid-1936 when they managed to achieve equal representation on the Salaries Committee, traditionally elected at the first Council meeting after the annual conference. Corry proposed a three-member committee, but Natalia Davies and Ruth Gibson presented 600 letters from women teachers requesting equal representation of men and women and pointing out that women represented over half of the Union's membership.

⁹See reports of the event in the *Register*, 8 January 1930: 17; *Advertiser*, 8 January 1930: 8.

¹⁰Council, 1 August 1930, SAPTU Minute Book 1929–30, N91/3, The Australian University Archives of Business and Labour, Canberra; Annual conference 18 August 1930, SAPTU Minute Book, N91/4.

¹¹*SA Teachers Journal* 21, no. 8 (1935): 11; 21, no. 10 (1935): 8–9; 22, no. 4 (1936): 5. Kinnear, "Mostly for the Male Members," 1.

After a long and bitter debate their motion was passed and a six-member committee formed.¹²

In February 1937 the women tabled a motion for equal representation for men and women on the Union Council for debate at the annual conference in May. Not surprisingly, the Male Assistants Association marshalled men teachers to attend the conference in force and to defeat the motion. The July Council meeting finally produced an explosion. In a repeat performance of the analogous meeting of 1936, Corry moved that a Salaries Committee of three be appointed. Natalia Davies lost a motion to defer the appointments. R. F. Brand proposed a five-member committee (president plus two men and two women). An amendment for equal representation of men and women was lost, as was Brand's proposal. Eventually the original motion was passed and Davies, Brand, and President Lushey were appointed.¹³

It will be useful to provide details of the major players. Natalia Davies, aged thirty, was a young assistant teacher in an elementary school. It was elementary teachers who were to form the bulk of the breakaway Women Teachers Guild. Peter Corry was double her age, a headmaster nearing retirement. He embodied hard-edged patriarchal views of the role of women and had the support of Union men. Although R. F. Brand's position is more difficult to characterize, we can say he represented a significant group of men who favoured conciliation (if not equal representation) with the women but who did not have sufficient support to oppose Corry in the 1930s.¹⁴

To return to the main events: at the 2 July 1937 Council meeting there was a proposal that the Union enter the Industrial Court yet again to negotiate salaries. The women were adamantly opposed. In private correspondence with the Director of Education, Phebe Watson indicated it was fear of being forced back into the Industrial Court on the previous terms that finally sparked the secession of women teachers from the Union. Not only had they been unable to increase their representation on the Union Council, they also had lost control over their fate with regard to Salaries Committee recommendations.¹⁵

¹²Council 5 June 1936 and 3 July 1936, SAPTU Minute Book 1935–36, N91/9. *SA Teachers Journal* 21, no. 10 (1935): 8–9; 22, no. 6 (1936): 11; 22, no. 7 (1936): 6.

¹³General Meeting, 22 March 1937, Male Assistants Association Minute Book 1935–39, N91/782; Annual Conference Minutes, 17 May 1937, SAPTU Minute Book 1935–36, N91/9; Council, 2 July 1937, SAPTU Minute Book 1937–38, N91/11.

¹⁴For details of teaching records see Teachers' Classification Board and Teachers' History Sheets, GRG 18/167 in State Records Office, South Australia.

¹⁵Council, 2 July 1937, SAPTU Minute Book 1937–38, N91/11; Phebe Watson to Director, 22 October 1937, Education Department Correspondence Files, GRG 18/2/1937/1532 in State Records Office (hereafter, GRG 18/2/1937/1532).

On 18 August 1937, a meeting of 400 women teachers at the Training College voted almost unanimously to withdraw from the Union and to form the Women Teachers Guild. At this meeting Phebe Watson was elected President and a draft constitution was accepted. Phebe had been at the heart of extensive secret negotiations prior to the breakaway. She had been a strategist in matters concerning women teachers for about thirty years, although she had rarely held official positions within the Union. She had spent the most of her career as a lecturer at the Training College and thus was well known by almost all teachers in South Australia. Her particular interest was the young women in one-teacher rural schools dotted all over the state. During the September holidays another meeting was held to inform country teachers of the Guild's platform. More than 300 women attended this meeting, thus indicating a broad basis of support for the new organization.¹⁶

The August to October Council meetings of the Union were explosive affairs. At the August meeting 600 notices of resignation (to take effect in three months) were received from women teachers. The Salaries Committee was abandoned and not reconstituted until February 1938. Having sought Corry's support privately beforehand, the Male Assistants Association proposed a conciliation committee of six men and six women. Women teachers indicated it was too late to attempt conciliation and Corry opposed the appointment of all women who had submitted their resignations. (This committee subsequently met twice and resolved nothing.) Recriminations continued at the September and October meetings. The women continued to attend as was their legal right. Corry claimed they had a "moral obligation to retire" and amid storms of protest from the more conciliatory group of men, he forced adjournment until December, by which time the resignations had taken effect. Five years (and Corry's retirement) elapsed before the Union considered reconciliation with the Guild.¹⁷

The strategic secrecy of the negotiations prior to formation of the Guild backfired when some women high school teachers felt they were not adequately consulted. Eventually they chose to remain in the Union. Private and public correspondence on this issue reveals the beliefs and aspirations of the leading women teachers. After the inaugural meeting of the Guild the

¹⁶Phebe Watson to May Mills, 30 August 1937, May Mills Papers, PRG 26/1, Mortlock Library of South Australian [MLSA]; *News*, 31 August 1937: 1; 1 September 1937: 3; 11 September 1937: 5. Andrew Spaulf notes the strategic importance of strong leadership in union growth; see Spaulf, "Invoking Ghosts of the Past," 99.

¹⁷Council, 28 August 1937; Conciliation Committee, 2 September 1937; Executive, 27 September 1937; Council, 1 October 1937; Council, 11 February 1938; SAPTU Minute Book 1937-38, N91/11.

metropolitan high school women met and decided that they would not be “stampeded” into a decision, and that country high school teachers should be consulted. As a result a meeting was arranged for the September holidays. Prior to this meeting Phebe Watson outlined her aspirations in correspondence with another activist:

My own feeling is that the new organisation will be truly democratic in that it will be an organisation run for women by women, with full representation from all bodies of teachers (women). Its aim, to make its own representations to the heads of department, is I think the right one, and my *conviction* is that women will get a fair hearing by putting their own case rather than having to first convince the Union of the justness of their cause, which for the past two or three years has been an impossible task.¹⁸

This quest for autonomy was evident at the September meeting of high school women when teachers discussed a long list of grievances prepared by Phebe Watson. Besides salaries and unequal representation on the Union Council, issues such as lack of career opportunities, inadequate sick leave and superannuation, and the masculinization of the public teaching service were canvassed. Phebe argued that teaching was “women’s natural vocation,” that the masculinization particularly evident in high schools should be resisted, and that adolescent girls should be taught by women. Although the high school women agreed all those claims were legitimate, they wanted redress. Some members regretted the haste of the breakaway and the unconciliatory attitude of women delegates. However, they also commented that the “men have been lax in permitting one man to be so autocratic—they have apparently awakened now but it was not really until the women took drastic steps.” But the crux of the matter was an amalgam of gender and sectional conflict. High school women worried they would merely swap dictatorship of men for that of elementary school women. In the final analysis the majority vote favoured remaining in the Union for one year and monitoring developments. The minority in disagreement resigned and joined the Guild.¹⁹

In the following months the Guild moved quickly to consolidate its presence. Offices in the central city area, library, and rest rooms were soon

¹⁸Phebe Watson to May Mills, 30 August 1937, PRG 26/1, MLSA.

¹⁹Notes made by May Mills in 1937, PRG 26/1, MLSA. For analogous cases in Winnipeg, and for discussion of the Chicago Teachers’ Federation and the National Union of Women Teachers, see Kinnear, “‘Mostly for the Male Members,’” 12; Collins, “Re-gaining the Past for the Present,” 43; and Sarah King, “Feminists in Teaching: The National Union of Women Teachers, 1920–1945,” in *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching*, ed. Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 191–92.

established. Members were encouraged to use them for social purposes as well as for meetings. The Guild and the Union duplicated a range of services, including Legal Defence Funds. By mid-1938 the Guild had launched its own publication, the *Guild Chronicle*, with Phebe Watson as editor.²⁰ In her official capacity as president, and privately, she applied to both the Minister and the Director of Education seeking recognition of the Guild. She was immediately guaranteed access to these authorities. She also corresponded with the Union president, privately, and publicly, offering to cooperate in matters of interest common to men and women. Many years were to lapse before that would happen.²¹

MAJOR CHALLENGES 1937–42

Not surprisingly, the first (and ongoing) major questions facing the Guild were salaries and access to the Industrial Court. Both the Guild and the Union favoured formation of a salaries board to negotiate salaries directly with the Education Department rather than to work through the Court. In 1938 the Education Department's position was unclear. Rumours abounded that the Minister was "refusing to deal with any question of salaries except by the award," yet the Guild was privately renegotiating the salaries of the lowest-paid women. By early in 1939 all parties individually agreed on the need for such a board but the Union's intransigence thwarted its establishment. An internal Departmental memo noted that Director Adey tried to negotiate with the Union for the inclusion of Guild representatives but was unsuccessful.²²

The Guild then applied for registration in the Industrial Court to achieve official recognition and to ensure its members would be protected should a salaries case be presented. All the acrimony of the breakaway recurred in the Court case. The principal protagonists again were Peter Corry and Natalia Davies (supported by Phebe Watson and Jessaline Cooper). The Union objected to the Guild's application on the grounds that women teachers were already represented in the Industrial Court. The Guild's case rested on the premise of a diversity of interests of its members and those of the Union. The

²⁰*Guild Chronicle*, 28 June 1938: 5. The importance of close social networks in sustaining women teachers' careers was also a feature of the Women Teachers' Association in Toronto. See Smaller, "Room of One's Own," 114; Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald, "The Historiography of Women Teachers: A Retrospect," in *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching*, ed. Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 12–15.

²¹Phebe Watson to Director, 22 October 1937, GRG 18/2/1937/1532.

²²Phebe Watson to Director, 11 August 1938, GRG 18/2/1937/365; WTG correspondence, 28 February 1939, GRG 18/2/1939/437.

Guild lost the case initially but won an appeal in May 1940. Justice Kelly noted in his summary that the service conditions of men and women were different and that the Union constitution did not adequately represent women's interests in cases of conflict between men and women. Sixty percent of women teachers had joined the Guild and therefore were not covered by the Union's representation in the Court. However, Justice Kelly was anxious to discourage fragmentation within unions and refused to award costs to the Guild. At the conclusion of the case Guild members were reassured that there was no intention of going to court, especially during the war. However, the Guild privately continued to press the Education Department for salary increases for the lowest-paid women teachers.²³

The second early focus of the Guild's attention was country teachers. There were two distinct groups: certificated assistants in large country towns, and those in one-teacher Class VII schools. The latter were overwhelmingly young single women and by far the lowest-paid teachers in the Education Department. It is pertinent to note again the personal influence of President Phebe Watson. After preliminary correspondence, the Guild presented a deputation to the Education Department in July 1938 on the "conditions of living, work and salaries of lowest paid teachers in Class VII schools." These teachers had fared worst of all in the 1935 salaries case. The Guild contended that in real terms their salaries were now lower than in the depths of the Depression, lower than those of a junior hospital wards maid or a cook in a country hotel. For their pittances they were expected to manage seven classes alone and teach all subjects plus needlework as an extra subject. The cost of living was much higher in the country and the living conditions were harsh. These women paid high board, often had to share bedrooms and assist with the housework, and suffered from physical and emotional isolation. Finally, the Guild noted that the Department was experiencing difficulties recruiting sufficient women to staff these schools. As a result of this deputation the Director approved a boarding allowance of fifteen pounds for these teachers, which neatly circumvented the need to return to the Industrial Court.²⁴

The Guild was also instrumental in the establishment of a hostel for women teachers in two major country towns. It badgered the Education Department into providing single rooms and running water in the hostels and intervened on behalf of women teachers harassed by boarding house keepers. However, much of the Guild's work with country teachers was in the form of

²³WTG correspondence, 6 May 1939, GRG 18/2/1939/1301; *Advertiser* 24 May 1940: 11; *Guild Chronicle*, 14 August 1940: 9.

²⁴WTG correspondence, 17 March 1938, GRG 18/2/1938/365.

individual cases, handled privately. This latter is an enduring characteristic of women's work in unions.²⁵

The Guild's commitment to country teachers had limits. In the early years there was much discussion about the establishment of country associations. Gradually this dwindled to discussions about visits to country centres, and by 1942 it was announced that country visits would be curtailed due to the war. Although the Guild continued to appeal to country teachers to join its ranks it precluded their active participation by holding annual conferences during the school terms. No country teachers held official positions: all were held by senior teachers in metropolitan schools. Finally, although the Guild demonstrated a clear commitment to the welfare of country teachers, it accepted the prevailing perception that these teachers, being young, would soon marry and resign from teaching. Thus, country teachers were not considered in discussions on issues such as promotion, superannuation, and even incremental salary scales: these were seen to be the perquisites of more senior women. All this is indicative of marked differences among women teachers according to age and experience.²⁶

Despite internal agreement on salaries and country teaching, the issues of promotion and seniority had the potential to expose deep divisions in the Guild. First, there were too few promotion positions for women teachers. In the rare event of a vacancy, competition was fierce. The Guild agitated for more avenues of advancement for senior women. It consistently claimed that teachers under the age of thirty-five were likely to marry and therefore lacked the career commitment of older women, as well as the teaching experience required for promotion. But for women over forty who remained single "it may be fairly said that it [teaching] has become a life work. Having made teaching a career, and incurred heavy responsibilities, should they then be prevented from climbing the professional ladder?"²⁷ The Guild argued that women whose career was teaching should be rewarded by increased status, salary, and associated opportunities to provide for old age through superannuation. In many ways these arguments reinforced contemporary

²⁵WTG correspondence, 6 May 1939, GRG 18/3/1939/1301; see also Hilary de Lyon and Frances Widdowson Migniuolo (eds.), *Women Teachers: Issues and Experiences* (Oxford: Open University Press, 1989), 174; *Guild Chronicle*, 19 June 1942: 6.

²⁶*Guild Chronicle*, 20 June 1939: 3; 3 December 1941: 5; 17 April 1942: 5; 14 August 1942: 5; WTG correspondence, 17 March 1938, GRG 18/2/1938/365. For a competing perspective on country teachers' career aspirations, see Kay Whitehead, "Career Paths for Provisional School Teachers in South Australia, 1875–1915," *History of Education Review* 23 (1994): 53–67.

²⁷SAPTU deputation to Director, July 1931, GRG 18/2/1931/1008; *Guild Chronicle*, 21 February 1940: 5.

definitions of women's work. The Guild consistently maintained that not only was teaching women's work but that girls should be taught by women.

The influence of a woman is of inestimable value, whether it be the young child just entering school, or with the girl of adolescent age, whose moral welfare is of such vital importance to the State. There are times when only women can deal with girls and their mothers, in certain circumstances which arise in school life.²⁸

In 1940 the annual conference passed a motion to this effect and also engaged the National Council of Women to lobby the Education Department on the Guild's behalf. In the burgeoning secondary school sector this discourse of danger was a weighty argument in favour of increasing promotion positions for women. As well, women teachers were also expected to undertake many tasks outside school hours: for example, chaperoning girls at school socials and sporting events.²⁹ Women teachers' work was further intensified during the war, as much of the schools' patriotic fund raising was delegated to them.³⁰ Finally, it was suggested that if promising students were to be attracted into the teaching profession there ought to be adequate avenues of advancement.

Although there was general agreement on the overall need for more promotion positions, tensions surrounding the relative merits of academic qualifications and experience were evident among Guild members, and these were further complicated by sectional interests. Teacher qualifications generally had been increasing since the early 1900s and promotion positions and incremental salary scales were tied to length of training, qualifications, and teaching experience. Problems arose when regulations changed and new qualifications were demanded, thus disadvantaging older teachers whose training predated the new award. The Education Department's unwritten policy in these cases was that teachers under thirty-five should upgrade but those over forty were too old to endure the rigours of further study. The latter group's experience sometimes, but not always, allowed them access to higher

²⁸SAPTU deputation to Director, July 1931, GRG 18/2/1931/1008.

²⁹*Advertiser*, 1 May 1940: 8; 15 October 1940: 13; *Guild Chronicle*, 16 October 1939: 17; see also Marjorie R. Theobald, "Discourse of Danger: Gender and the History of Elementary Schooling in Australia, 1850–1880," *Historical Studies in Education* 1 (1989): 29–52.

³⁰*Guild Chronicle*, 5 December 1940: 7. See also Martin Lawn, "What is the Teacher's Job? Work and Welfare in Elementary Teaching, 1940–1945," in *Teachers: The Culture and Politics of Work*, ed. Martin Lawn and Gerald Grace (London: Falmer Press, 1987), 50–63.

salaries and promotion. Given that Guild activists ranged in age from about thirty to the late fifties, the potential for conflict is obvious.³¹

In the 1940s, public secondary schooling consisted principally of technical schools and a few high schools. Although the Education Department favoured teachers with university qualifications for these schools, there was no clear-cut policy and many senior elementary teachers, with and without these qualifications, taught in technical schools. These teachers were eligible, by virtue of experience, for promotion in both technical and elementary schools, but the question of their academic qualifications was unresolved. On the other hand, most high school teachers lacked elementary teaching experience and therefore were excluded from promotion in elementary schools. Again, the potential is evident for conflict between qualifications and teaching experience, with the added complication of sectional interest.³²

All these potentialities were realized in October 1940 when Ruth Gibson was appointed as a temporary inspector to assist Inspector Adelaide Mietheke, who was unable to cope with her inspectorial duties along with coordinating the enormous Schools Patriotic Fund (the Education Department's contribution to the war effort). Ruth Gibson, aged only thirty-eight, had had a distinguished career in the Education Department, rising from the position of assistant teacher to chief assistant in elementary schools and then chief assistant in a technical school. She had studied thirteen university subjects since her graduation in 1920 and spent 1938 travelling overseas. During that time she was a delegate to the International Council of Women Conference in Edinburgh and investigated the British and American school systems. Her travels were extensively reported in the *Guild Chronicle*.³³ Her connections with the Guild were intimate and long-standing. She had been active in the Union, was at the epicentre of the breakaway, and at the time of her inspectorial appointment was secretary of the Guild. According to custom she resigned as secretary, but retained her Guild membership.³⁴

Ruth Gibson had been promoted over women more senior in age, experience, and position. Furthermore, the position had not been advertised in the usual manner. The Guild was inundated with requests to find out "why

³¹WTG to Director: Case of the IIIA assistants, 28 September 1942, GRG 18/2/1942/1774.

³²WTG to Director, 7 December 1940, GRG 18/2/1940/2160.

³³Ruth collected information about the National Union of Women Teachers' equal pay campaigns and noted that in New York State equal pay had already been implemented. *Guild Chronicle*, 15 February 1939: 6; *Guild Chronicle*, 15 April 1939: 12; *Advertiser*, 9 May 1939: 3; *Advertiser*, 8 July 1941: 6; WTG to Director, 7 December 1940, GRG 18/2/1940/2160.

³⁴*Guild Chronicle*, 5 December 1940: 15.

something so unprecedented was launched upon an unsuspecting service." Deputation after deputation waited on the Minister and Director of Education. The headmistresses were upset because Ruth was only a chief assistant and the rare appointments of inspectors were usually made from their ranks. The chief assistants and the headmistresses were dismayed by Ruth's youth and lack of experience in a promotion position. They believed experience and seniority had been cast aside in this appointment. The usual slurs on the career commitment of younger (marriageable) women were again repeated. To complicate matters still further, the Director had intimated the optimum age for promotion was around thirty-five, thus implying a lack of confidence in older women.

All the women knew of Inspector Miethke's impending retirement, which would provide a rare opening to the most senior explicitly female position in the teaching service. They contended Ruth's temporary promotion would give her some advantage when the vacancy was declared. The Guild members steadfastly maintained their protests were not directed at Ruth Gibson but rather at the departure from well-established precedent of promotion by seniority. Given the close associations of the major participants, however, it would have been difficult to separate the personal from the professional in this crisis.³⁵

When Adelaide Miethke retired in July 1941, Ruth Gibson won the position as Inspector of Girls' Schools. This time the high school women from the Guild and the Union combined to put their case to the Director. Their concerns related to the lack of promotion positions for women in high schools compared with technical schools. There were also undertones of sectionalism in their request that high school senior mistresses and headmistresses of technical schools be accorded the same status. They asked for the appointment of a woman inspector for high schools and also wanted clarification of the necessary qualifications and requirements for other promotion positions. In a thinly veiled reference to Ruth Gibson they suggested that "if experience *abroad* is a factor it should be stated in the regulations."³⁶

Although promotion issues may have threatened the Guild's internal cohesion, the question of the employment of married women united the membership. The marriage bar had been effective from the 1880s in South Australia, although it appeared in the regulations only in 1915. The issue arose at the beginning of the Second World War, when the Education Department began to re-employ married women in a temporary capacity to cover staffing

³⁵WTG to Director, 7 December 1940, GRG 18/2/1940/2160; *Guild Chronicle*, 18 April 1941: 5; 5 December 1940: 15.

³⁶President's File [T. S. Raggatt], vol. 1, 1945-47, T/42/5/1, ANU archives; *Advertiser*, 8 July 1941: 6.

shortfalls. In June 1941 the Guild passed a motion that “the employment of married women, except in special circumstances, should not be supported.”³⁷ Given the sexual division of labour in schools, the employment of married women did not directly affect men teachers’ positions; therefore, it was not a critical issue in the Union. Although the Guild reluctantly countenanced married women’s temporary employment because of the war, its arguments consistently reinforced the prevailing ideology that marriage and motherhood were incompatible with waged labour. It argued that “married women have divided interests, thus their service cannot measure up to the work of permanent staffs.”³⁸ The Guild valued marriage and motherhood as the “ideal state” for women. Indeed, this article has demonstrated that its battles across a range of issues reinforced the existing definitions of women’s role. However, it should be noted that the Guild’s activities were in the public sphere, the traditional world of men and work, not the private sphere of the home. In 1941, for example, it declined to support the Housewives Association’s protest against rising bread prices “because the matter was outside the Guild’s province.”³⁹

The Guild’s principal concern was for the woman “who must remain single. The right to work for her living and maintain her economic freedom is an absolute fundamental for her material and moral well being.”⁴⁰ The Guild argued that the employment of married women disadvantaged other (read single) women.

Married men receive basic wages, therefore the additional money coming into a home from the wife would lead to a feeling of inferiority by other women.

Women working thus may employ “help” at low wages.

Child endowment would add further to the income.

Injurious to the classification and position of students awaiting appointment.⁴¹

³⁷*Guild Chronicle*, 18 April 1941: 5; Kay Whitehead, “Provisional School Teachers in South Australia, 1875–1915” (M.Ed. thesis, Flinders University, 1990), 50–53; Kinnear, “‘Mostly for the Male Members,’” 10–12.

³⁸WTG to Director, 25 March 1943, GRG 18/2/1943/631. Women teachers’ organizations in New South Wales and Ontario also supported the marriage bar for similar reasons. See Gray, “Crying in the Wilderness,” 2; and Reynolds and Smaller, “Ontario School Teachers,” 166–69.

³⁹*Guild Chronicle*, 3 December 1941: 5; Collins, “Regaining the Past for the Present,” 43.

⁴⁰*Guild Chronicle*, 15 August 1939: 6.

⁴¹*Guild Chronicle*, 18 August 1941: 10; WTG to Director, 25 March 1943, GRG 18/2/1943/631.

But the crux of the matter was that married women teachers were displacing single women teachers in metropolitan schools, those displaced being sent to country schools for an extra term of country service. Thus single teachers were being forced to leave their homes and to incur extra expense, to serve under junior headmasters, and to lose status and chances of promotion. The Director explained that staff shortages were such that “the Education Department was in the hands of the temporary teachers and had to accept them at their own terms.” This was only the beginning of the collective debate about the employment of married women as teachers in public schools, since shortfalls rapidly increased during the postwar baby boom. In times of shortfalls, married women teachers had bargaining power in the South Australian labour market. They could obtain positions in schools close to their homes on account of traditional family responsibilities, whereas permanently employed teachers could always be transferred at the discretion of the Education Department.⁴² On the other hand, their temporary status, a status actively supported by men and single women, denied them adequate salaries, promotion, and superannuation, the very rights Guild members sought for themselves. Marital status was a significant line of division among women teachers as well as between men and women. Such were the complexities of gender relations.

I turn at last to consider the Guild’s effect on the Union during the period 1937–42. There is no doubt the Union considered women’s issues more seriously after the breakaway. Changes in the Union included the establishment of women’s rest rooms, a direct response to the Guild’s initiative. Both organizations competed for women’s membership and recruited directly from the Training College. The Union gave financial support for the establishment of a Women Teachers Association and included the women vice-presidents in deputations. Lynda Tapp was nominated as president-elect in 1941 but defeated in the closest contest on record. The following year May Mills’ nomination as president-elect was successful and she became the first woman president of the Union in 1943. This was a significant achievement for women teachers in the Union.⁴³

That the Guild was somewhat bemused by the Union’s attention to women’s interests is indicated by editorial comments in the *Guild Chronicle*.

⁴²*Guild Chronicle*, 15 April 1939: 7; *Guild Chronicle*, 30 October 1942: 9; WTG to Director, 25 March 1943, GRG 18/2/1943/631.

⁴³Hyams, “Battle of the Sexes,” 41–42; *SA Teachers Journal* 27, no. 4 (1943): 3; Council, 3 June 1938, SAPTU Minute Book 1938–39, N91/12.

The Union refused to allow women's claims, until the Guild came into existence. Now it actually pushes them, seeking equal pay for men and women!!

How that Guild of ours keeps the men on their toes!

Just a parting thought—how long would the little gentlemen dance to the ladies' piping if the Guild did not exist?⁴⁴

This skepticism about the depth of the Union's commitment to its women members was well founded and in important issues there was still the appearance but not the substance of change. For example, the Union delegation led by Peter Corry brought forward a motion on women's salaries at the 1940 Australian Teachers Federation Conference. Lest it be thought Corry was mellowing, he was arguing only for a common policy on this issue. The whole debate backfired, his motion was overturned, and a new one making equal pay Federation policy was passed. Reluctantly, the Union then adopted equal pay as its platform. But in 1943, when the Union decided to enter the Industrial Court with a new salaries case, it refused to argue the case for equal pay in spite of the vocal protests of the High School Women Teachers Association.⁴⁵

At the Union's annual conference in 1942 a motion was passed instructing Union Council to appoint a committee to explore ways of healing the breach with the Guild. Conference discussion indicated a want of forbearance on both sides at the time of the split and that high school women teachers were already cooperating in matters of mutual interest. It should be noted that the motion came from the Country and Suburban Association, not the influential Male Assistants Association that had been so entangled in the breakaway. There was no discussion at all about the original source of dissatisfaction, that is, unequal representation on the Union Council. However, the possibility of capitalizing on the rift in the Guild (the Ruth Gibson crisis) was canvassed.⁴⁶

Delegates from the Union and the Guild met in August 1942. The Union's delegate offered to negotiate equal representation on the Council if the Guild joined the Union. The Guild doubted the Union's commitment in this matter and reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining its separate identity. There was no resolution to this impasse and the Union Council withdrew from further negotiations with the Guild. The Guild reiterated its 1937 offer to cooperate in matters of mutual interest but it was years before any meaningful dialogue

⁴⁴*Guild Chronicle*, 26 November 1943: 3.

⁴⁵*Guild Chronicle*, 29 April 1940: 9. *SA Teachers Journal* 26, no. 2 (1942): 3; 27, no. 7 (1943): 12; 29, no. 5 (1945): 18–19.

⁴⁶Annual conference minutes, 12 May 1942, SAPTU Minute Book 1941–42, N91/15.

between the two organizations resumed, and, as we have seen, amalgamation was delayed until 1951.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

In some ways the material benefits of the Guild's first five years were small: a boarding allowance for country teachers and a few more promotion positions. However, the significant achievement was that women teachers' views and issues were placed on the Education Department and Union agendas in ways hitherto unguessed. To women teachers, the 1937 breakaway seemed the only logical course of action after years of unsuccessful negotiations with men for support of their causes. The issues underlying the breakaway ran deeper than sectional conflict. Women teachers were challenging the system of patriarchal relations as it operated in the Union. From 1937 to 1942 the Guild succeeded in forcing the Department and the Union to deal with women teachers seriously as a force to be reckoned with in education and union affairs. The struggles and conflicts outlined in this article highlight the complexity of gender relations during this period. The Guild's activists were single and mostly senior teachers in age and promotion position. They defended their interests in ways that challenged, however, the traditional role of women in society. Their defence of the interests of other women, for example, country teachers and married women, effectively supported the patriarchal order. Finally, their battles with the Union and in their own organization show that gender, age, teaching experience, qualifications, and marital status were more important lines of division than was sectional conflict.

⁴⁷File on the Amalgamation of SAPTU and WTG, N91/792.