

# Edna Ryan - feminist

1904-1997

Edna Ryan achieved national prominence in 1974 when she presented the WEL submission to the National Wage Case, arguing that women should receive the same minimum rate of pay as men. Now, thirty years later, WEL celebrates this major breakthrough in the long history of equal pay, and the life of the truly remarkable woman who made it happen.

Born one hundred years ago in Pyrmont, then the industrial heartland of Sydney, Edna Ryan was the tenth child in a family of 12 children. By the time she was five, her father was unemployed and her mother was the family breadwinner. As Edna grew up she experienced at first hand the great contradiction of the family wage system. Edna was politicised by the fact that her mother, as a woman and the family breadwinner, could earn just over half the wage paid to a man.

When she left school at the age of 16 and gained employment as a clerk typist, she found that women were second class citizens in the office. They could earn only two thirds of the male wage and had no access to promotion because they were expected to leave their job after a few years to marry and have children. Unlike their male counterparts they could not be both workers and parents, have a career and be economically independent.

Over the next fifty years, she tried to find an organisation that would challenge and change this ridiculous state of affairs. First, she joined the Communist Party, where she planned a revolution to achieve equality for women. But when the Party realised that her agenda did not match theirs, she was expelled. Then she joined the Labor Party in search of a parliamentary career to change the laws in relation to working women, but failed to secure a winnable seat. And when she returned to the paid workforce as the family breadwinner in 1956, she found that her union was not interested in promoting equal pay for its women members.

Undaunted, in 1965 Edna persuaded her union to take a claim for equal pay to the New South Wales Industrial Commission on behalf of a small group of white collar women workers in her workplace. When the union won the case however, it made an agreement with the employer that there would not be a flow on to other groups of eligible white collar women in the industry. It made a similar agreement in relation to the equal pay decisions of 1969 and 1972.

But Edna did not give up. In 1973, she joined the newly formed Women's Electoral Lobby and found her true political home. With a group of like-minded young women she used her union experience and knowledge of the industrial relations system to prepare and present the now famous submission on the minimum wage to the National Wage Case in 1974.

Its success led her to a new career as a feminist activist. In 1975 she published her first book with Anne Conlon, *Gentle Invaders: Australian Women in the Workforce 1788-1974*, and her second, *Two-thirds of a Man: Women & Arbitration in New South Wales 1902-08*, in 1984. She organized the first Women and Trade Unions conference in 1976, which became the basis of the ACTU Women's Charter in 1981, started the first post-war work-based childcare centre in 1977, served on the executive of the Family Planning Association of New South Wales when it was entering a new policy direction, and actively supported women's theatre and art groups. But she never lost sight of her main commitment – to use the industrial relations system to make the wages and conditions of women workers equal to that of men.

By 1985, when she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Sydney in recognition of her services to women, Edna had become a feminist icon. Her views on industrial relations were sought by politicians and trade unionists of both sexes. When she retired to Canberra in 1991 she initiated research into the impact of enterprise bargaining and superannuation on women workers. She died in 1997 aged 92, knowing that she had made women's employment issues front page news.

Edna Ryan was a shrewd political strategist and a source of inspiration, vision, and strength to the Women's Electoral Lobby. She not only inspired all who met her with her warmth, wit and optimism, great intelligence and common sense and her unquenchable energy, she also trained countless women in the art of politics and encouraged others to become trade union activists. She was guided by the belief that women could achieve change only by taking up the cudgels themselves.

This is her great legacy.

Lyndall Ryan  
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