

Why the fight for pay equity must not be lost

TWO WEEKS ago 300 demonstrators braved freezing rain in Wellington to protest at the Government's decision to close the Department of Labour's Pay and Employment Equity Unit and at the continuing inequity between women's and men's pay estimated at 12 per cent across the workforce.

The unit supported and oversaw pay and employment equity reviews in all government departments from 2005 to 2009. The reviews not only examined if women in female-dominated occupations (like the thousands of social workers in Child Youth and Family and over 800 women education support workers who work with special needs children) are underpaid compared with occupations dominated by men, but they also looked for particular employment practices which are recognised internationally as causing a pay gap.

All reviews found a pay gap in median equivalent fulltime earnings. These ranged from less than 5 per cent to over 35 per cent. All of them identified things that needed to change. These included women and men receiving different starting salaries for the same job, pay progression practices that favoured men's occupations, and women getting a smaller share of additional rewards such as



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bonuses. The reviews also showed that women were over-represented in lower paid jobs, that they had fewer career opportunities and that they were under-represented in senior jobs. Many more women than men filled the part-time positions and these were often "poor quality" jobs.

Two occupations were the subject of pay reviews (social workers and education support workers) where tools were used to measure the skills and responsibility needed in these positions and compared them with male dominated occupations. Large discrepancies in pay were identified. For example, one investigation compared education support workers' jobs to those of corrections officers (a male dominated workforce) and found that overall the jobs had the same level of skills, responsibilities, demands and working conditions.

It found that pay rates for corrections officers were much higher. If the value of their work was recognised, the support staff would get just over \$8 more per hour when they started in the job and just under \$5 more per hour at the top of the scale. The Government has said nothing about how it intends to rectify the known discrepancy in their pay.

Likewise, another pay and employment equity review revealed that a 9.5 per cent pay gap between men and women at Child Youth and Family is primarily due to the fact that 80 per cent of the service's social workers are women. Again the Government has said nothing.

The Public Service Association has filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission claiming that the Government's scrapping of the investigation is a breach of the Human Rights Act. Unions are not going to let this issue drop.

So does the Government simply expect pay equity to happen all by itself? If it were as simple as that don't you think we might have had pay equity by now and the previous government would not have seen the necessity of setting up the Pay and Employment Equity Unit in the first place?

Minister of Women's Affairs Pansy Wong has said the Government would "leave no stone unturned in trying to close the pay

gap". At the moment it feels as though the Government has picked up the first stone – the Pay and Employment Equity Unit – and thrown it down a well. We await the disturbance of further stones with great interest.

I want to stress this is not just a public sector pay issue and it is not just a trade union issue. The presence at the demonstration and in the coalition of groups such as Rural Women of NZ and Business and Professional Women testifies to that, as does the enthusiasm of the Wellington businesses who offered to make up the pay gap with a symbolic 12 per cent discount on the day of the rally. Because quite apart from the harm done to women workers in the public sector, what sort of signal does the Government's attitude send to employers in the private sector?

One of the speakers at the rally commented how there were women there who had been children when their mothers demanded equal pay in the 1970s, and she hoped she wouldn't be back again in 20 years with her own daughters, still asking for the same fundamental right to equal pay. How many more times do we have to stand in Wellington's rain and wind to correct this most basic of injustices?

■ Helen Kelly is president of the Council of Trade Unions.



Lopsided: Women fare badly in many measurements of how workers are paid.