

Women's Labour Pains

Women's increased ability to control their fertility looks like helping to give a belated boost to female pay packets over the next few years. As the 60s' baby bulge flattens out in the run-up to its sharpest dip in 1995, British companies will no longer be able to bank on a supply of cheap youth labour.

The government, with its dire track record on equality at work, is frowning its brow. Ministers now warn the economy will be hit unless firms frame new recruitment strategies to cope with the teenage shortfall. For once, market forces are poised to bolster women's position in the job market.

There is a long way to go until the new dawn for women. Thirteen years on from the equal pay legislation, average hourly earnings of women working full-time are a shaming 73.6% of male earnings. Women lose out disproportionately in bonus and overtime pay. Childcare at work is seen as a rare luxury for selected professionals. Many women remain ghettoed-off in low-paid, low status jobs. The rights of part-time workers face further attack.

But a newish, optimistic critique is taking root, and its key tenet contains a pleasing dash of retributive justice. Firms that continue to treat women workers shoddily could be in for their commercial comeuppance. Smart bosses in highly-competitive sectors such as finance are already beginning to offer women a fairer deal at work. As the supply of school leavers dries up, women will have their potential to flex bargaining muscles enhanced. They will demand - and have a good chance of securing - better pay, promotion prospects, flexible career patterns and workplace nurseries, even. Or that's the hope.

There *are* optimistic signs, but relatively few employers

have yet tumbled to this form of enlightened self-interest. The report which set government alarm bells ringing makes grim reading: only one in seven firms had any grasp of the looming shifts in demography. Few had made plans to attract back into the labour force women who have had children to help bridge the school leaver gap. The number of those aged between 16 and 24 will have dropped by 1.2m by 1995.

If women workers have been traditionally dumped-on by employers, then the labour movement must plead guilty to collectively consigning 'women's issues' to the sidelines. At last, through a happy confluence of crusading zeal and the survival instinct, things have begun to change.

Ideological correctness apart, simple arithmetic dictates that unions must attract more women members. Women now make up more than a third of the membership of the TUC unions. The big general, service and retail unions in particular, have refashioned recruitment strategies. Issues affecting women in the workplace - from cancer-screening to shift premium payments - are getting a higher priority on bargaining agendas.

It is a tough slog translating rostrum rhetoric into the reality of recruiting on the shop floor and unions still have to shake off their predominantly macho image. Women remain glaringly under-represented in union hierarchies, from the general council to the branch committee. The recruits the movement needs to survive will not be fooled by skin-deep PR.

The prominent news and tv publicity surrounding union-backed 'equal value' test cases arguably gave unions' image among non-union women workers their biggest boost of recent years. Unions must now use these rulings to eradicate discriminatory pay structures by negotiation.

Centrally, the TUC's new equal rights department, fully up and running by September's Congress, needs to be given sufficient cash and clout to help unions make fresh recruitment inroads and deliver a better service to existing members.

The potential for getting a better deal for women workers has never been greater. Unions have a responsibility to harness these forces. If they botch it this time, they won't deserve another chance. •

Helen Hague



Eyes down in the East End: Are women still being stitched up?