Belinda Probert
What I would like to do now is move on to the next session in which we are going to have very short presentations from all these eminent speakers and I am going to turn the microphone off after about 5 minutes. It is really to generate, to make sure that we hear some of the more specific questions that affect different groups and see the different angles from which people are coming to this issue and then we will open it up again to a more lengthy discussion with the floor. So I would like to start by inviting Sharan Barrows who is the President of the ACTU to kick it off.

Sharan Burrow
Thanks Belinda and to Pru and Mary thank you very much particularly for your advocacy and visionary support of women and work.

Now like Belinda I am actually amazed that we are here.

I have to tell you that two years ago union women were seen to be pariahs on the radio because we supported unpaid maternity leave for casual workers, -that is a no cost option.

And three years ago (I am going to be a little bit irreverent here and tell you) union women on the ACTU executive had a major struggle. They actually had a stand –up, loud, very loud, argument with the blokes around the table to send a women to the ILO to negotiate on our behalf around the maternity protection convention. That is the Convention of course that holds the 14 weeks paid maternity leave standard.

Lisa Heap is here today. When we won the fight there was this argument because neither Helen Creed nor Wendy Caird, or I could actually go to the ILO. And they said “There you go we don’t have a woman” and I said “Yes we do!” And I rang up poor old Lisa who was the Women’s Officer for the Australian Education Union and said, (at that point I was her boss), and said “Pack your bags sister, you are going to Geneva tomorrow”.

So for two years of work there was a real struggle for union women internationally to fight those who wanted to dilute that maternity protection convention.

Amongst a few other things, breastfeeding breaks which we will get to down the track and other conditions that women already have in Australia the 14 weeks of paid maternity leave is of course enshrined in international standards. Now it is just criminal that we are the only country other than the US in the OECD not to have that as a working woman’s right.

I am very unapologetic about the fact that this is about women and work because when 44% of the workforce are women and we also want to have babies (and indeed I would like to have a grandchild some time or other, not just yet but some time or other) then that is absolutely essential.

Now the ILO convention provides for 14 weeks of paid maternity leave and it’s time we raised the maternity protection convention as one of the responsibilities of the
Australian Government. To that end the unions will be asking State Labour Governments to come out and provide support for endorsement of that maternity protection convention. This will be another way of assisting Pru and others to put pressure on the Federal Government to sign the convention, enshrine the rights and figure out how we do it.

I think the attendance says something today about the importance of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner’s position. I wanted to mention that because if you look at all of the women who contributed, you know the work of Sue Walpole, of Ann Sherry, and of Susan Haliday who helped us get through in a very unpopular context, the unpaid maternity leave. And now Pru Goward. That partnership between women and the Sex Discrimination Commissioner is essential and we should never lose sight of that. It’s a position that Australian women fought for and thank you Pru for your work but we must continue to fight for that position.

We are at the point now of, “not if but how,” and I just want to say a couple of things about that. For the ACTU it is absolutely fundamental that there are 14 weeks Government funded paid maternity leave at minimum rates. We are not being greedy, we could ask for average weekly earnings; we are asking for minimum rates. That’s the living wage $431 a week just adding the $18 we achieved two weeks ago. That’s not a big ask. It is less $400m a year.

It is less than that dog of a scheme, the baby bonus scheme, which actually discriminates against women who choose to or want to go back to work or have to go back to work and so that is essential.

We’d like an employer levy over and above that to average weekly earnings. We will promote that. We don’t hold out a great deal of hope around that and make no bones about it, the 14 weeks is our first fight. We do however put employers on notice that we will bargain over and above it if there is no employer levy to equalize wages because this is about income security.

I understand all the arguments about the support for women and families and childrearing more generally and we should get to that. We should move on to those debates.

I launched the Anglicare Winter Appeal this morning and the churches are saying that people earning up to $40,000 are struggling just to make ends meet,. You only need a two income couple, (leave aside even the single families where women are predominantly the parent) but you only need a two income couple to have a part time partner amongst them, particularly if it is a women and she happens to be a child care worker, (remember child care workers earn less than $24,000 a year) and you’ve got families earning less than $40,000.

The bulk of Australian families in fact earn less than $45,000 and if you think they are struggling anyway then that notion of affording to have a child and having no income means the choice between having a child and affording your house payments and putting food on the table or not having a child.
Go beyond that. For professional women the APESMA Survey told us very clearly that with child care costs and no paid maternity leave it is almost impossible for women to go beyond having one child. And they are professional women.

So Australia has a problem no matter what the argument that interests you, whether it is about women’s rights to be part of the workforce and therefore industrial rights or whether it is beyond that.

I mean to finish up here by saying we must get to the how and then we must move on to other issues like child care, like pay equity and so forth. But its 25 years on. I was a young activist in the 70’s and I watched older women who I just thought were the most brilliant advocates talking about universal child care, free affordable child care. Universal child care, paid maternity leave, all of those issues around equal pay. It’s a quarter of a century on sisters and we are not there, now we owe it to those older sisters, we owe it to ourselves and we owe it to our daughters.

Pru is right, let’s not get carried away by everything we want today, let’s talk about it, but let’s focus on one policy issue that is achievable right now if our voices are strong enough. $400m minimum of 14 weeks at a minimum pay, not a big ask.

Belinda Probert
Thank you very much Sharan. The next speaker is Linda Hancock who is here today with other hats on but is the Victorian Convener of the Women’s Electoral Lobby.