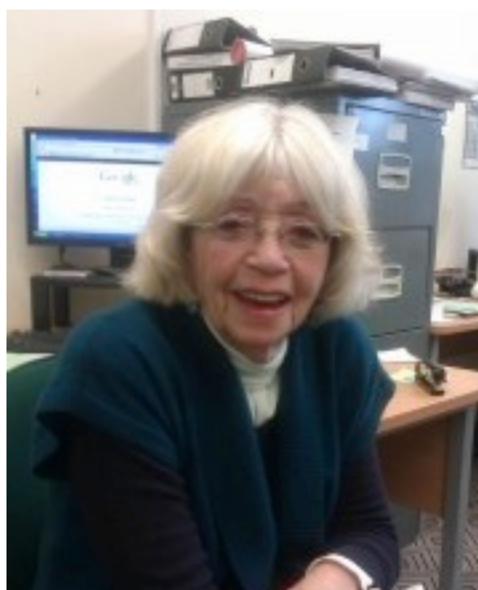
AWEA Centenary Oral History

Reflections on AWEA

KAYE GREEN

Interviewed by Jen Margaret in Porirua, 24 June 2014



Kaye Green was AWEA's first full-time paid tutor-organiser from 1975 to 1980. She made a significant contribution to the revitalisation of AWEA and to trade union education. She tutored the first women's studies course in Auckland; supported the establishment of Aotearoa's first community law centre; supported the flourishing adult literacy programme; and along with others established the Association for Community and Continuing Education (now ACE Aotearoa).

Kaye has since worked for YWCA and the Department of Conservation. She was admitted to the Bar in 1988 currently works at Whitireia Community Law Centre in Porirua.

Kia ora Kaye, can you start by talking about the years you were involved in AWEA and the roles you had?

Well, it was the 1973 United Women's Convention that stands out in my mind as the starting point for a whole lot of things. I met Margot Roth at the United Women's Convention and I was absolutely stunned—she was such an intellectual—and John Colquhoun who was a great support.

That's where I remember meeting Margot because there was a questionnaire at the back of the Convention booklet and people filled it in. I said to Margot, 'We should analyse this questionnaire.' She said, 'Absolutely.' She was a sociologist and I was a studying history and anthropology. I was spending a lot of time reading new and exciting stuff that was coming out in the feminist movement, and about the role of evolution. The United Women's Convention was absolutely marvellous. I made friends there that stayed friends for a very long time.

Out of all of this intellectual ferment Margot and John asked me in the following year if I would run a women's studies course, and then if I would do the WEA summer school (held

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in early January 1976). A WEA summer school is a residental, educational activity and there is one person who delivers a lecture in the morning, every morning for five days. Then you get to talk about it in the rest of the day and there are discussion groups on things of interest to the trade union movement. They asked me to talk about the biggest social problems facing New Zealand and I talked about the Māori land issues that I saw coming up which I thought were of much more profound significance than any other issues of inequality that we were looking at.

It stunned people, most of whom had never thought about it. It was a very divided, very separate world in those days. There were trade unions that had largely Māori members or Pacific Island members and there were trade unions that had largely Pākehā members. They didn't have any overall support movements or pro-Māori movements amongst labour leaders pushing for equal values. This was the period when a Pacific Islander got arrested by the police on the way home because he had a comb in his pocket that he had taken away from his workplace where they made combs. That stands out it my mind. It just seemed so mean—not only was it racist, it was mean. But I also recognised that New Zealand was several steps ahead of where I came from in America.

Did you set up the whole programme for that summer school?

I just did the part that I was asked to do which was to deliver a series of lectures on the future of equality in New Zealand. I think Margot and John probably thought it would be about the feminist movement but I actually thought the Māori land issue was going to come first and it did start, fairly soon thereafter, to be a major issue for Pākehā and for Pākehā governments. So there we were and I talked to them every morning and left them all, I think, feeling shocked.

Where had you learnt about the issues and where did your analysis come from?

I'd been doing anthropology since 1958. I'd been all over the Pacific and I'd met all kinds of variations of the land issue. I did land law in the Cook Islands when I was at university. New Zealand was very proud of the fact that it knew how to handle Polynesian people—look at its great track record in the Cook Islands and Samoa. Well, I'd lived in both of those places and I knew that track record wasn't great, and I also knew some of the things that people did to prevent the occupiers from tinkering with their traditional land rights. My understanding was from anthropology and prehistory so I had a different approach to most people. I didn't have a legal approach in those days—I added that on later.

Were Māori involved in the summer school?

There weren't very many Māori there at all. A lot of trade unionists came and as I remember it there wasn't as much talking across the groups as you might think.

In the lectures I talked about how the Māori Court operated; how land was taken; Parihaka and the land movement there; the present state of the Māori Land Court and the present state of Māori land ownership.

There was a lot of discussion—there was constant discussion all week. I was quite pleased with the response actually. None of them had thought about it or about what the effect of this sort of civil strife would be on New Zealand. We hadn't got to the Springbok Tour yet.

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How many people came to that summer school?

About 30 to 35—quite a good number. I never had a summer school as successful as that one in Whangarei. The response to it was very satisfying, for me at least. I did a couple of others but I think I talked about more mundane subjects.

You were the first person to be in the tutor-organiser role full-time. What year did that begin?

The old WEA had a reasonably close ties with the Labour Party and the role of full-time tutor-organiser was one of the things that WEA had agitated about for a long time. They asked me if I wanted to apply for the job and I did. The other person who they were considering seriously was Joris deBres. I was technically employed by the Auckland Technical Institute and was seconded to be tutor-organiser to the WEA.

I began in December 1975. We were still under the Unitarian Church on Ponsonby Rd, next door to the Arts Centre that they eventually developed in the old police station. That was the sort of place that would give you pneumonia if you let it.

I kind of kept track of things. I had two very good receptionist-secretaries—one was part time and paid while the other was part-time and voluntary. In late 1976—soon after we got this much larger ship of state organised—we moved up to the university. A house, 21 Princes St across the road from the main university, became available and we took half of it.

My predecessor was an ex-school inspector, Ed Gillies. He was brilliant. He was the one who was first hired by the WEA as a tutor-organiser. He got paid directly by the WEA so they must have got some money from somewhere. What they lacked was funds to guarantee long term continuity so they employed him on an hourly basis and paid his expenses. He didn't work anywhere near full time—I doubt he worked half-time—but he knew the education system and he knew everybody in the Education Department in Auckland. He was the one who set up much of the infrastructure for paying tutors through the night school classes, so we had a strong ongoing involvement with the night school and the community school community.

I came into a situation where the subsidising of classes by the Education Department was already set up. I was perhaps more adventurous than Ed in the classes that I would run. Once a year I would take the rolls from my classes and I'd go up to the Education Department and we'd go over them to see that they fit. You had to have 12 students, or something like that, and you had to meet so many weeks of the term and you had to teach something that they recognised as being useful.

On the North Shore at Glenfield College, David Lythe had set up the first creche, or at least one of the early ones, for unmarried mothers to bring their children to school and continue their education. Ian Sinclair in South Auckland, I think at Tāmaki College, developed a community school around providing things that people wanted and needed at the time.

What was AWEA's role in those schools?

We were kind of the leading spirit in this—intellectually if not practically—partly because we had been in business for such a long time providing educational opportunities for workers. I

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always thought that if you are going to provide educational opportunities for people who have been working all day and are tired, you've got to provide them with something that is at least interesting. So we had interesting ideas about what to study and interesting ways of using the money and the time. So perhaps you began with adult literacy and from there you followed whatever interest you had. Hairdressing was a great favourite—you could run a number a different things under hairdressing.

We also got involved with running work skills programmes. That was more of a struggle because they were funded by the Labour Department and the Labour Department could not see why literacy was a work skill.

I was involved with setting up the Association for Continuing Education[1] with David Lythe and others which we promoted to other schools. There was a night class supervisor in most schools so we spent a bit of time trying to convince people to stop being night class supervisors and to become heads of community education. Now that is what they all are.

We still ran night classes but we moved them out of a central building. There were a lot of crafts classes, for example, traditional Māori crafts. I've still got somewhere a beautiful handmade little bag that was given to be by a Māori crafts tutor. I'm not sure if we got involved when I was there in the development of kapa haka. You know everybody did haka —kapa haka was a sculptured art form. Pita Sharples was my babysitter when he was a student at university. We met him as a school boy at Te Aute College through one of his teachers. He was coming to university so I said, 'Do you want a place to live? I need a babysitter.' He said, 'Yes.'

He influenced me more than I influenced him because he was, and remained, a really interesting conduit into what was going on in Māori society. So did June Mariu, who was the president of Māori Women's Welfare League along with all the former presidents of the Māori Women's Welfare League. I started a thesis on the origins and influence of the Māori Women's Welfare League. That gave me a reasonably big corpus of very stroppy friends— they were wonderful, they really were.

How did you make the relationships to do your thesis on that topic?

I just called them up—I just wrote them letters and called them up. Afterwards I gave the information I had to Loren Hunia who was a Māori scholar doing her PhD.

What were the connections and relationships with Māori that you brought to AWEA?

I knew many people in the Māori community because my first husband Roger taught in the Anthropology Department. That department had the single closest ties with Māori at that stage because they hadn't started the Māori Department. That started under Anthropology until Bruce Biggs eventually got it off on its own and all of these people were in some way involved with the Anthropology Department. Merimeri Penfold, was employed as a tutor in linguistics when she was quite a young woman. She taught people how to pronounce and speak Māori. So I knew all those people at the university.

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[1] Now known as ACE Aotearoa http://www.aceaotearoa.org.nz/about-us/history

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AWEA was strongly supportive of any development that would broaden racial perspective in New Zealand. Lots of trade unionists were Māori and many trade unionists had good relationships with Māori. One of the things I got involved with was the Education Subcommittee of the Auckland Trades Council because WEA had always had an invitation to go to Trades Council meetings. The Education Subcommittee had fallen into disuse so we helped resurrect it. For me personally many of those contacts, with the Carpenters' Union and other unions, came from the summer schools. Courses were run through the Education Subcommittee because we were supporting the buildup of that committee.

Were there Māori involved in governance or advisory to AWEA at that time?

I can't remember any Māori being involved with governance. You didn't really get older Māori in the cities in those days—it was all young people. For every senior, retired, European trade unionist there was no equal and opposite number of Māori in those days, the 1970s and early 1980s.

Can you tell me about the literacy programme?

Martin Harrison, who ran the literacy programme, and I were hired about the same time. Martin organised and trained the tutors and then provided them with on-going support. They were matched with students—not in classes but on a one to one tutoring basis. The object of the exercise was that a person learnt to read what they wanted to read—whatever impelled them to come to the movement. If what you wanted to be able to do was to read your child a bedtime story at night, that's where they started. Maybe someone wanted to read *Best Bets* so that's where they started. They started with the motivation to read and what people wanted to read. They were entirely flexible in their orientation and how they taught. As far as I know, there was no set 'We are going to read this in this way.' The tutor training was brilliant. The tutors were perfectly able to tackle any system that would unlock reading for people.

Was that informed by Freirean thought?

Certainly the name was discussed and we read him. Practically speaking it was the ability and willingness to use anything. If somebody came with *Best Bets* in their pocket and said, 'This is what I really want to read,' Martin's tutors taught them. They tried to pair them with a tutor who would have some interest in the same area.

As a WEA, we believed that not being able to read was a social issue. Not having freedom of movement or understanding … these are all social issues.

I don't remember actual numbers of students in the programme but it was big. At any one time it probably had 50 or so tutors on its books but it did tutor training on a regular basis and tutors had more than one student. It was a large and thriving thing. Then it grew a lot more complex after both Martin and I left. I don't know exactly how it developed after that but I know it increased in size and eventually became much more widespread as part of the whole overall education system. They hived off eventually and adult literacy went a parallel way but that was a number of years down the track.

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Another significant initiative during your time with AWEA was women's studies. Can you tell me more about that?

They asked me during 1974, before I was tutor-organiser, if I would do a class on women's studies. They had a small grant to use for that so I set up the Women's Studies class. The WEA was second in the country to do this after Rosemary Seymour from Waikato. She was providing women's studies at university level and we were providing it to anyone who wanted it.

So AWEA was the first one doing it at community level?

We would do lectures for everybody who asked. We looked at a whole variety of women's experience. We went out and talked to schools, technical institutes, that sort of thing. We also tried to provide practical stuff, like creches in schools so women could come back to school. David Lythe pioneered the one at Glenfield College—they ran a full-time creche and all the young women brought their children to the creche and went to school.

I did lectures at technical institutes—I used to lecture the apprentices. I used to say to them, 'The only parent you will ever know is your mother, because you only have your mother's word for who your father was.' That used to be just so upsetting to people. Except there were a very large number of people who came up to me afterwards—almost entirely women—who said, 'My mother recently told me the person I think is my father isn't.' They could definitely relate to it but the apprentices were shocked and horrified. I used to do lectures with Pamau Papalili, a social worker with gangs—the two of us used to shock the technical institute students.

Can you tell me about WEAs involvement in establishing the Community Law Centre in Grey Lynn?

There were WEA courses, *Know the legal system, Know your legal rights,* run in halfway houses all over the Ponsonby, Grey Lynn and Freemans Bay area. Assorted young people, mainly Māori and Pacific Island, lived in these houses so they wouldn't have to live on the streets. This was the period when the Ponsonby gang the King Cobras got started—they were some of the students. Vapi Kupenga, a young woman from the East Coast who was trained as a social worker, organised and taught many of those classes. The Community Law Centre grew out of that.

How would you describe the students of AWEA during the time of your involvement?

They were wonderful. They were everything. I had an 80 year old midwife who took one of my painting classes. That was a traditional class for the WEA and they did it very well. They enlisted some first rate New Zealand painters like Colin McCahon and others as their tutors.

Do you have any sense of what was happening in WEA during the 1950s and 1960s?

It wasn't doing much, though it always ran painting classes. I have pictures bought from people in painting classes. It wasn't getting support except from what people paid for their classes. There was a small budget available for courses but there wasn't any government funding, as far as I know, until we attracted the government funding for a tutor-organiser and expenses.

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WEA had fallen out of being involved in much trade union education. One of the things for me to do was to resusciate our relations with trade unions and trade union training. It was remarkable because looking at it now it is such a thriving industry but it was very limp then. The period before my involvement in WEA was one of incredible blandness in New Zealand. I never found New Zealand bland—I found it one of the most exciting places I'd been to in my life which is why I kept staying here—but I know New Zealanders did.

So during your involvement the traditional classes kept running?

They went on too and there was also a flourishing of additional, new, more cooperative courses offered outside of WEA in conjunction with similar organisations. Probably if there was anything different during the period when I was involved it was that there was a full time person able to give time to developing cooperative links with similar educational initiatives. Previously the trade union movement wasn't as strong. It was numerous—everyone was a trade unionist—but I don't think it was very strong. It went through a period of real weakness and now of course it's fallen over because the Labour Party stomped it to death. I'm a member of the PSA which is the last remaining big union in New Zealand.

Many of the things that I did supported the development of a community of adult and community education people. For a long time the WEA had been on its own—it had no natural supporters except for the university, which out of a sense duty used to be supportive. I wanted to broaden the base. I think that was Margot and John's idea too … they were in governance and they vastly approved of that.

I think if there was a criticism of what I was doing, it was that I was not getting enough credit for the WEA in all the support expansion that I was doing. I think that was a fair criticism. I was bursting with new ideas—I still am actually. Every time I saw a new idea I drove a peg in it and I think Margot and John were very supportive of that. They just wanted to get the WEA back up on its feet.

I always enjoyed the time I spent wheeling and dealing and looking back on it I never had a better employer than AWEA. They never squelched you. They were always enthusiastic about new ideas. Since then I've spent a lot of time explaining to my bosses why I did what they thought was some mad thing.

But within WEA that 'madness' was understood?

Yes, or at least it was given due consideration. They were all just so clever and funny. The years I was with WEA were just some of the most exciting times. You could think of something and say, 'I want to do X, Y and Z,' and they would say, 'What are your resources to do it?' I would list this ephemeral collection of resources and they would say, 'All right, it sounds reasonable. Go ahead.'

One of the things I did during this period was organise the Auckland WEA Radio Collective. There were six of us and we took turns in pairs doing educational programmes on Radio Pacific. We did it because Gordon Dryden, who started Radio Pacific, did so with the idea it would be educational. He called up and said, 'I expect to have you delivering classes over the year.' I said that I thought classes over the year might be a bit boring and could we do lectures or seminars. So for a couple of years we did seminars every Sunday morning. We organised this giant resources manual and that became the basis for doing things on the

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radio and we gave it to schools and people like that. It was done in the usual way—we ran all the pages off on the photocopier and the total cost of the whole project was the cost of the ringbinders. Then we peddled them to people. I don't think we sold them. The folder had every kind of educational resource you could think of. There was a whole section on apprenticeships; there was a big section on community education; one on university; one on more free form things; one on social welfare and educational resources that they could provide.

Was that the first time WEA had done something like that on radio?

It was. We did that for a couple of years but after Gordon Dryden left it was a struggle to remain in Radio Pacific because, would you believe it, just when they had some advertiser listening ready to buy air time we came on talking about some really radical thing. We had no limits on what we talked about. People would ring in and ask questions. That was fun. I enjoyed that.

The Radio Collective was another one of our ventures—there were many ventures. There were experiments in different types of teaching and that type of thing.

Are there particular moments or initiatives that were significant or stand out to you?

I loved the radio collective. I enjoyed that enormously and I think we did a lot of really interesting stuff there. I enjoyed the trade union work and went on doing trade union work of various kinds. I enjoyed it all. I really liked developing new things and WEA was probably the organisation par excellence that gave me the opportunity to do just about anything that I wanted to do. They were just very supportive of anything to do with education or workers or education and workers. They were extremely supportive.

The only time that I was relatively well paid according to the standards of the time was when I was working for WEA. I went downhill a bit after that!

What were the external perceptions of AWEA during your involvement?

They went from being a pale grey I think to vivid crimson. It was a respected senior member of the informal education community. It was doing what it had set out to do but the definition of worker had expanded to include women and children, that sort of thing.

How was AWEA's relationship with the rest of the WEAs?

Sparky. They were a lively bunch of people. They were all well educated. They all had opinions about everything. Just about all of them had radical political associations. Being around them was like being in an electric storm. There was electricity in the air and it was exciting. I always thought this was what New York was like. As it turned out it wasn't what New York was like, New York was actually quite boring.

AWEA remains in my mind as one of the great periods in my life. It was as good as my years in the Pacific. I really enjoyed it because of the people and the ideas they espoused. You never stopped thinking and since I never stopped thinking anyway it was a really good nexus point.

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What about the lasting effects from your period?

I think during that period AWEA made an enormous impact and they had a finger in every pie. As far as I know they still do. It was just nobody made as much impact as I would like them to have or I thought we were doing at the time—that's the problem. But I've become a bit more philosophical about the sequence of history. I think it's a stairstep thing—when you are young you want change to happen rapidly and definitively and to change the world for ever. It does change, but sometimes you don't see it for a long time or it comes out a different shape from what you thought.

The WEA was like a graduate school in argumentation and ideas. There was never, ever something not good to argue and I've been arguing ever since!

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