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Abstract
Irene Arrowsmith was an activist and a feminist whose life was committed to industrial and social justice. She was also a dedicated and much loved wife, mother, grandmother and great grandmother.

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Irene Arrowsmith (1931–2006)

Doreen Borrow and Frances Laneyrie

Irene Arrowsmith was an activist and a feminist whose life was committed to industrial and social justice. She was also a dedicated and much loved wife, mother, grandmother and great grandmother.

Irene was a generous and caring working class woman, who did not suffer fools easily. Her childhood in the 1930s and 40s was shaped by poverty and war. These early experiences fuelled Irene's sense of injustice, creating in her the desire to challenge narrow-mindedness, intolerance and exploitation where ever she found it. According to Zelda D'Aprano (2001, xi), she was one of the trade union women whose activism between the 1940s and the 1960s, particularly around the issue of equal pay, remains unrecorded. Her dedicated involvement in trade unions and feminist activism continued during the 1970s and 1980s, and she retained an active involvement in both after her retirement from the Miscellaneous Workers Union in 1989.

During her working life she was a clerical worker for the Waterside Workers, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), the Wollongong City Council, the Building Workers' Industrial Union (BWIU), the South Coast Labour Council (SCLC), the Federated Engine Driver's and Fireman's Association (FEDFA) and the Miscellaneous Workers' Union (Missos). While at home as a full time mother in the 1960s she served terms as President and Secretary of the Union of Australian Women (UAW) locally. She also took on the role of Secretary to the South Coast International Women's Day Committee for at least four years. Irene was District Secretary of the Federated Clerks' Union at age 16 and a long time delegate to the South Coast Labour Council. The SCLC awarded her life membership in 1984 in recognition of her lifetime of struggle and support. She chaired the SCLC's International Women's Year Committee in 1975 and

was a member of the Women's Action Group during the 1970s. She represented the SCLC as a delegate to the first Australian Women's Trade Union Conference in 1976. She was secretary of the Wollongong Working Women's Charter Committee and a trustee for the Wollongong Women's Centre Steering Committee, playing a major role in helping to establish the Wollongong Women's Information Centre which opened in April 1980. In 2004 she became the Vice-President of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH). The list of community campaigns she was active in includes, but is by no means limited to, the Campaign Against Rising Prices (CARP), Anti Nuclear Campaigns, Vietnam demonstrations, the Judith Mitchell Campaign, equal pay, the harassment of women at work, unemployed women, domestic violence and the rights of Aborigines. She rarely missed doing her turn on a picket line or attending demonstrations. Irene never missed May Day and took part in the march until she was no longer able to go the distance, at which point she would always be in the mall awaiting the arrival of the marchers and cheering them on. In fact her last political outing was on May Day 2006.

Irene was born in Portland, New South Wales, youngest of six children born to Violet and William (Bill) Taylor. At the time of her birth her family lived in a bag and iron humpy in an unemployed camp at Cullen Bullen, near Lithgow. Irene's father, like many men of the Depression era, was an itinerant worker, moving from town to town in search of work. Irene's siblings were all born in different towns – Evylin in Leichhardt, William in Thirroul, Jean in Goulburn,[1] Olive in Orange and Donald in Blackheath. Only three months after Irene's birth the family set off again, this time headed for the South Coast, Bill on his Harley Davidson motor bike with the two elder children Evylin (aged 17) and William (aged 16). Violet and the younger children (Olive age 10, Donald age 5 and Irene) caught the train. After arriving in Wollongong the family lived in another unemployed camp called 'Happy Valley', now East Corrimal, surviving on food coupons that comprised the 'dole' at the time. Irene first went to school at Corrimal Public (as did Neville – her life partner), but later transferred to Wollongong Primary just before the Second World War. The family regularly moved between lodgings, first in Corrimal and then in Wollongong at Campbell Street, Cliff Road and Harbour Street. According to Irene, during the war they were

> ...able to get such accommodation because all the rich people who would normally have lived in such a

> nice area had moved away to places like Bowral in the Southern Highlands. They thought Wollongong and Port Kembla would be bombed by the Japanese because of the steelworks, munitions, mines and waterfront so the poor people had much better places to rest their heads. Of course, they couldn't afford to escape the threat (Letter to Christine Howe, 1994).

Bill, who was a carpenter by trade, had eventually found work on the South Coast railway, building the Otford tunnel. Irene described her father, somewhat paradoxically, as a 'bit of an anarchist', a 'Wobbly and a Lang man' (Letter to Christine Howe, 1994; Personal Interview 2001). In one letter she wrote:

> My father would not accept the fact that his family who had nothing (we had a box for a table once) should be put on the street by someone who owned several houses. I remember one AWFUL landlady forcing her way in (mother must have been out) and my big, handsome father saying to her, 'Listen Missus, you can't tell me you got seven houses through honest toil' (Letter to Crystal, n.d.).

Bill deserted his family when Irene was in Primary school. Irene recalled he couldn't always pay the 30 shillings weekly maintenance, but managed every couple of weeks (Personal Interview 2001). She remembered this vividly as she often had to play the 'go between' on the issue of maintenance.

Irene claimed her family had always been political and her mother encouraged radical ideas in her children. One of her earliest memories was attending a demonstration with her mother in support of the Dalfram (1938–9), when the wharfies blocked the shipping of iron to Japan. Violet belonged to anti-war organizations in the 1930s and unemployed organizations during the Depression. Her 'house was a distribution point for illegal literature when the Menzies Government banned some political parties and organizations' (Letter to Crystal, n.d.). She was also a member of the Workers' International Relief Fund (WIRF), established in 1920. The local group at Corrimal 'was the centre of working-class activity' (Arrowsmith 1998). Irene recalled:

> She was on anti-eviction committees. If unemployed people couldn't pay their rent (they had no money) landlords used to get the police to evict them and they used to throw the families out onto the footpath with their pitiful bits and pieces of possessions. The committees used to stand guard and as soon as the 'wallopers'

> had gone they used to break into the houses and move the families back in until some sort of shelter could be arranged. We used to be evicted fairly regularly and mother was known for having chased a much hated and many propertied landlord off the premises with a straw broom – telling him she knew her rights as a tenant and he could not come on the property (his) while she was a tenant. She wasn't paying rent of course – she had no money (Letter to Crystal, n.d.).

Violet was also a member of the South Coast Progressive Women's League, a splinter group from the New South Wales Housewives Association.[2] According to Irene, the Progressive Women's League was established in Wollongong as a backlash against the conservative leadership of the Housewives Association by women such as Eleanor Glencross (Personal Interview 2001). Glencross[3] became the salaried Chairwoman of Directors of the NSW Housewives Association in 1938 (Foley 1983). She was a committed Presbyterian and member of the Women's Temperance Union, whose leadership style was increasingly seen by many as dictatorial. In 1941 she 'accused the Newcastle and Wollongong branches of harboring communists and expelled the whole membership' (Smart 2006, 25). Irene remembered her mother attending a mass meeting of the Housewives Association during this period as part of a 'strong movement to "get rid of them" [the conservative leadership] and put a stop to their backward looking anti-working class activities' (Arrowsmith 1998).

Irene received her formal education in the public school system and reached Intermediate level at Wollongong High School. Her first job on leaving school was in a café in Crown Street. The family had a close relationship with the Communist Party and at the age of sixteen Irene was given special dispensation to join the Party and went to work in their office. Eric Aarons was the organiser at that period. After the split in the Communist Party, culminating with the formation of the Socialist Party of Australia in 1971, Irene did not belong to any political organisation. Nonetheless, the ideals and politics she espoused at a very early age remained with her, as did her commitment to the class to which she belonged.

Irene was a member of the Eureka Youth League. While attending a Christmas camp at Towradgi with other members of the League, she met Neville Arrowsmith at a dance held in the old Jam Factory, and their romantic interest in each other began. Their marriage took place in April 1951 at the Wollongong registry office, which was at that time located in the Wollongong courthouse. Her wedding dress was made by Sally Bowen,

another of the region's well known women activists. The dress was a beautiful sky blue, with delicate and intricate beading on the Peter Pan collar and bodice (Personal Conversation dated 6th June 2004). The man who performed the ceremony, Claude Hall, told Irene's mother with savage cynicism, 'These marriages never last'. But last it did, and to those privileged to know the couple it was a wonderful example of what a marriage should be. They were 'mates' in every sense of the word. They raised four children, and had six grandchildren and three great grandchildren, all of whom were loved dearly. The politics the two shared strengthened them and prepared them for the hard times ahead. Their first home was a single room in the home of Eric and Betty Aarons and later they had a room at Sally Bowen's. After the births of Teddy and Martin, they were allocated a Housing Commission home at Warrawong. They later swapped this house for a larger home at 21 Lorking Street Bellambi where the family grew, with the birth of two daughters, Naomi and Mary. Irene's mother Violet also moved in, and lived with them until her death.

Irene left the paid workforce to become a full time mother during the early period of her married life and Neville became the sole breadwinner. Despite her domestic duties, she found time to involve herself in activities associated with her childrens' school and to participate in the political events that were occurring at that time. During the 1960s she served terms as President and Secretary of the Union of Australian Women (UAW).[4] At this time the regional branch of UAW was responsible for the introduction of the first cervical smears in cancer units and the first talk on the 'pill' in the Illawarra. The UAW was also a strong supporter of International Women's Day (IWD). Irene served several terms as Secretary of the International Women's Day Committee[5] until she returned to full time work. The celebration of International Women's Day was important to Irene. She wrote in her 'Notes on IWD':

> When we first started our 'visitors book' and began collecting memorabilia it was during the 50s and 60s when women were not seen as all that important in society except as 'good' wives and mothers and fund raisers. In our small way we began to document the interests and social involvement of local women... We were proud that our visitors book was signed by famous people such as Professor Linus Pauling, American peace crusader and twice winner of the Nobel Prize... a Russian woman cosmonaut... a woman famed as leader of the French resistance during the second World War... an Indonesian

> women's leader who was later murdered during the struggle for democracy and women's rights in Indonesia… Australian artists, writers, environmentalists, activists for indigenous rights… All names in our little visitors book (Notes on IWD, n.d.).

In these notes she also recalled an incident from 1963, when she was pregnant with Mary, about an IWD luncheon held at the 'old miner's hall':

> The hall was packed and Sally [Bowen] was determined that we serve each guest with their meal while they sat down. Sally was always hospitable, like the true farmer's daughter. She had organized huge pots of jelly and custard. Unfortunately the weather was SO hot that the jelly melted and flowed into the custard. It was so traumatic at the time… (Notes on IWD, n.d).

In 1965 Irene returned to the paid workforce and worked for the BWIU. She later worked for the Missos and remained with them until she retired in 1989. Monica Chalmers also worked in the same building, now known as Fred Moore House. Between them, it has been said, they solved more problems for the union members than the officials ever did. They were known to be consulted on health matters, affairs of the heart and both were fountains of knowledge on many subjects. The building was a great place to visit in those days and when you went there you could always be assured of a cuppa and a chat, mostly about politics.

Irene and Monica were not only known for providing a comfortable and safe haven at the Labour Council. They also challenged the status quo across a range of issues including women's rights. Well before women were allowed to drink in public bars Irene and Monica insisted on accompanying the men to the local hotel for a drink after trade union meetings.[6] They laughed when recounting how the blokes really didn't like it one bit but defended their right to enter the public bar for a drink, even if it was only lemon squash (Interview with Doreen Borrow, Irene Arrowsmith and Monica Chalmers dated 18th August 2004). They claimed that the men didn't really want them there because they were seen as 'respectable women'. Irene claimed that these men did 'not want this sort of behaviour from them'. They had to support them because it was Communist Party policy to support equality (Arrowsmith 2002). Irene's comments on the dilemmas that male and female activists at the time faced were insightful. In a talk to the Illawarra branch of the ASSLH in 2002 she claimed:

> No one who lived through the Bob Menzies and Cold War era could know how terrible these years were. Academics, writers, artists, actors had their careers destroyed if they expressed any progressive ideas. We are told that those years were contented and safe years but they were the opposite for anyone who had any progressive ideas. …the older women's groups felt under pressure to prove that they were respectable even though their policies and actions were radical. Illawarra did not have as much bitterness as the capital cities and in the end we were all able to work together. … [But also] it was a time of political upheaval within the left – the unions and labour movement. The Communist Party which had fostered and encouraged a number of women's organisations both internationally and locally was also in turmoil and many long time members left and formed a new party – the Socialist Party (in 1971) – and this split carried through into the women's movement. The Communist Party had supported the Women's Liberation movement but the new party clung to the old, more conservative ideas and many organisations such as the Union of Australian Women and the various trade union women's committees and auxiliaries who had been a back stop for their husbands who were seen as the bread winners with the women as housewives and mothers scorned Women's Liberation and refused to take part in many of the campaigns (Arrowsmith 2002, 11).

Irene's generation thought they could take on the world and win in the face of great opposition. She was part of a movement that brought changes to the lives of women and provided a measure of equality that was not available when they entered the work force. Caught between the First and Second wave of feminists her stories come from a generation who have yet to be fully acknowledged. As Irene reminds us, they were a generation caught between the need for respectability, activism, workers rights and women's rights and they paved the way for the Second wave of feminists in Australia.

Female trade union activists such as Irene Arrowsmith, her contemporaries Doreen Borrow, Monica Chalmers and Peggy Errey, and her sisters, Evylin Taylor and Olive Howe had been engaged in the struggle for equal pay in the Illawarra region for up to 30 years before a local branch of the Working Women's Charter emerged in the mid 1970s (D'Aprano 2002, xi). By 1977 the South Coast Labour Council had 20 women delegates, approximately one fifth of all its delegates (Atkinson

1977). Irene, Monica, Doreen and Peggy were there. Women's issues raised in various SCLC minutes by these women during the late 1970s included childcare, women's healthcare, women's refuges, International Women's Day (IWD), International Women's Year (IWY) and peace. Also noted were women's workplace issues including a number of cases of harassment (some centered around sexual harassment and others around union membership), unemployment for women, the closure of a number of local factories, concerns about the specific issues facing migrant women and the Australian Council of Trade Union's (ACTU) Working Women's Charter.

The local Charter Group was encouraged by the SCLC's leadership and was active well before 1977. Irene claimed the trade union women had to push really hard to get interest in the Charter going in Wollongong (Personal Interview dated 24th January 2003). The SCLC had an active Women's Action Group that had some success working with the younger women's libbers during International Women's Year in 1975. However according to Irene, these younger women disappeared fairly quickly off the scene at the end of that year. Irene also felt the SCLC did not really have much effect on working women, nor penetrate the ideas of the union membership at that time. Most unions had male leadership who were nervous of women 'taking men's jobs,' with their perception that women were not 'real' workers and were only temporary in the workplace (Arrowsmith 2002). One of the examples she often cited was from the Missos:

> ...when I worked in the Miscellaneous Workers office, they had a very militant section. I remember a general meeting ...they were incensed because there were women there, school cleaners in the main, but also cleaners from the TAFE and University. They were voting a certain way and I remember the watchmen were incensed with 'bloody women', who weren't really workers in their eyes because they weren't industrial workers. But they were the strength of the union then (Arrowsmith 2002).

Within the region there were specific problems confronting working women. The Wollongong Working Women's Charter Committee (WWWCC) claimed:

> [This] city, while facing the same kinds of problems as other cities in Australia, has the added burden of inadequate public transport, migrant density, poor community support networks and a lack of job opportunities for women. These factors contribute to the physical, social, cultural and economic isolation the

> women of Wollongong experience as individuals and as a group (WWWCC Press Release, March 1980).

Local emergent strategies around development of the Charter to address these issues in the early stages included getting representatives on the National Charter Committee, writing articles, networking at grass roots level, and publicity. Irene had chaired the SCLC's International Women's Year committee and was elected as a representative to the first Australian Women's Trade Union Conference at the University of Sydney in August 1976 that was held to write the ACTU's Women's Charter (SCLC minutes dated 21st July 1976; Invitation from the Women's Trade Union Commission dated 25th June 1976). Irene remembered attending the four day conference. It was the first time she had been to a university and she was excited about the new possibilities that would emerge from the collaboration between women:

> ...it was a wonderful new experience. I'd never had anything to do with academia. I was totally impressed and spent the weekend in the dormitory...They were just like cells I thought. The conference discussed and formalised what should be in the Charter demands for working women (Arrowsmith 2002).

In later years Irene became more and more passionate about history. She was particularly concerned that women's stories in the Illawarra region be recorded. She believed that 'women are known for their tenacity in overcoming challenges' (Notes on Wollongong Women's Centre n.d.). Irene saw her own life, and that of many of her friends, reflected in the words of one of her favourite songs "Bread and Roses", written by James Oppenheim in 1911, to honour the female garment workers struggles in the United States:

> As we go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
> go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.
> Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
> Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.

Irene shared her love of history with Neville and together they worked to do what they could to ensure that the history of the working class was recorded. They were foundation members of the Illawarra Branch of the ASSLH when it was established in October 1995. Neville remains the Treasurer, a role he has

performed for a number of years and Irene recently served two terms as Vice President. Irene has contributed to a number of articles in the society's journal *Illawarra Unity* (1998a, 1998b and 2002). She has also been guest speaker at several of the society's forums, her last speech taking place in 2006. She encouraged the women at the Wollongong Women's Information Centre to record their history, attending meetings held to rediscover their her-story during the late 1990s. She was also a member of their archives committee in 2004. Along with long time friends and comrades Monica and Doreen, Irene has willingly shared her stories with many interviewers over the years. Many now have memories of a warm and generous comrade. One of Doreen's favourites is of "the young girl attending a rally with children in tow":

> .... I will remember her great sense of humour, her generosity of spirit, her dedication to the class she belonged to. Somehow I always felt the better for talking with Irene whether it was on the phone or in person. She made me laugh and there are not many people who can do that today given the state the world is in.

Notes

1 Jean Taylor died in Bathurst before Irene's birth.

2 By 1940-41 the New South Wales Housewives Association was one of the largest women's groups in Australia, with 115,000 members. It continued to grow peaking in the 1960s with a membership of 175,000 (Smart 2006). In Wollongong the group focused on working class women and had affiliations with the Miners' Women's Auxiliaries, the Waterside Workers and Seamen's Committees, and the Building Trades Union Women's committees (Blackley 2001, Curthoys and McDonald 1996).

3 Eleanor Glencross had a long association with the New South Wales Housewives Association that included the role of President of the Victorian Association in 1920 and President of the Federation of Housewives Association of Australia (Foley 1983).

4 The Union of Australian Women (UAW) dates from 1950 and had branches in all States. Through its affiliation to the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), it had Status A with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and all its subsidiaries. Affiliation to the WIDF linked UAW women with the Socialist and Third World countries and enabled it to conduct many exchanges with women overseas. The UAW worked closely with the trade union movement and had enrolled within it by far the largest number of female members of any organisation in Australia. The UAW was strongly committed to working for a world without war and for disarmament (Wollongong Women's Information Centre 1979, Submission to Council for Premises).

5 South Coast women began International Women's Day (IWD) meetings early in the 1930s. There are records of an open air meeting in 1931 and a working women's conference in Corrimal in 1935. The South Coast IWD Committee is known to have the longest continuous record of any in Australia. It was the Scarborough Miners Women's Auxiliary which organised the first IWD luncheon (SheWaves March/April 1999, 5). The Miners Women's Auxilaries continued to host an IWD luncheon until the group was forced to disband in 2003.

6 Conversation recorded at an Archival Committee Meeting held at the Wollongong Women's Information Centre dated 20th August 2004. Members attending the meeting included Irene Arrowsmith, Monica Chalmers, Maureen McGee, Viviane Morrighan and Frances Laneyrie.

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