

Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

Volume 1
Issue 4 *Illawarra Unity*

Article 4

July 1998

Women in Leadership and Support Roles in the Labour Movement

Irene Arrowsmith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/unity>

Recommended Citation

Arrowsmith, Irene, Women in Leadership and Support Roles in the Labour Movement, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 1(4), 1998, 18-22.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol1/iss4/4>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Women in Leadership and Support Roles in the Labour Movement

Abstract

In the strikes of the 1890s, women were there and they were active in the anti conscription campaigns in the first world war – already by the 1920s a women’s group was calling for equal pay. By 1927 an organisation called the Militant Women’s Group (MWG) had been set up. Some of the writing from this group was quite outrageous and shocking and they didn’t seem to care. At that time, George Reeves – a jailed IWW Leader – said, ‘Woman’s place is where she wants to be’ – a slogan taken over by Women’s Liberation forty years later.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT ROLES IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Irene Arrowsmith

In the strikes of the 1890s, women were there and they were active in the anti conscription campaigns in the first world war — already by the 1920s a women's group was calling for equal pay. By 1927 an organisation called the Militant Women's Group (MWG) had been set up. Some of the writing from this group was quite outrageous and shocking and they didn't seem to care. At that time, George Reeves — a jailed IWW Leader — said, 'Woman's place is where she wants to be' — a slogan taken over by Women's Liberation forty years later.

In the devastating Timber Workers' strike of 1929 a woman, Betsy Mathias, was captain of the organisation of the picket lines. Food was hard to come by but somehow the men were fed and women faced the police batons in support of the pickets.

Women were active in the great anti eviction struggles of the early 1930s when families were put out on the streets with their pitiful possessions. Eviction Committees (Workers Defence League) were very strong in the Illawarra region — especially around Corrimal — my father in law, Ted Arrowsmith was on the Workers Defence League and happened to be at the Doctors at the time there was a dust up during an eviction by police. The local policeman, a nasty piece of work known locally as 'Frostiface', was carried into the surgery, having apparently been clobbered with a piece of four-by-two and bleeding freely. The much-loved local GP asked Ted if he would mind waiting a minute while he attended to the policeman and Ted heard terrible groans coming from the surgery as the Doctor stitched Frostiface's wounds without the benefit of anaesthetic. The doctor, sympathetic to the unemployed, thought the bully should be able to handle a bit of pain.

On the northern coalfields after a family was evicted onto the street and Workers Defence League members had been arrested and taken away the house was locked and barred and quickly

put up for auction. In a gesture of solidarity by the town, no one went to the sale so the Company sold it in Sydney. Then a strange thing happened — the house disappeared. A team of Workers Defence League men and woman dismantled the house and removed everything so there remained only a block of land and a chimney.. No one ever knew who had done it. It was a mystery.

The Domain in Sydney was the focal point for agitational activity and women began speaking from the soap boxes — as one was arrested and taken away another woman took her place. Often they were told to 'go home and wash your husband's socks' and given other such advice but of course that only made the women cheekier especially since some of the husbands didn't have any socks — only sandshoes.

Meetings of unemployed workers were brutally broken up by police and members of the fascist New Guard and women were in the meetings and demos of course. Among the awful things they were accused of was that they were 'unladylike'. Shocking!

Leftist women's groups of that time kept right away from the Feminist organisations. The main one was the Feminist Club and from 1918 to 1934 its President was Mrs Preston Stanley (she later became Mrs. Preston Stanley Vaughan). Mrs Preston Stanley was also a National Party organiser and in 1931 she also worked for the Sane Democracy League (a far-right organisation) and in 1947 was working for the Women's Movement against Socialisation. She had been elected to the NSW Parliament in 1925. The Feminist Club proclaimed that more women would enter community life if only GOOD domestic staff were not so hard to get. Edna Nelson (later well known ALP activist , Edna Ryan) wrote at the time that the feminists 'came from the leisured classes'.

Just before the Second World War, there was a fairly large women's organisation called the NSW Housewives Association which was always lauded by the establishment as a voice of Australian women. A woman called Mrs Glencross was the State President. There was quite a strong movement to 'get rid of them' and put a stop to their backward looking anti-working class activities. I remember that, sometime in 1939, my mother went to Sydney in the train (nobody had cars) to a mass meeting at Sydney Town Hall to help wrest control from the officials and turn the organisation into a new type of Housewives' Association..

By 1929 women were speaking at meetings, letter-boxing, producing a newspaper (*Woman Worker*). They joined the picket lines and confronted police in baton charges as well as somehow providing food relief for starving unemployed.

Unemployed single women could not get relief unless they

Illawarra Unity

reported to the Government Labour Bureau for work first. They would be offered domestic work, usually in country or on far outback properties. There were horrific stories told about what happened to these young girls on lonely properties. After many protests unemployed women who had previously not been entitled to rations now received them — one tin of condensed milk, one tin of jam, half a pound of butter, quarter of a pound of sugar, half a cake of common soap, three loaves of bread, plus one shilling (10 cents) worth of meat. This was supposed to last them! Routine relief food usually contained a tin of treacle. I sometimes wonder if the Colonial Sugar Refining built their empire on the empty stomachs and ruined teeth of the unemployed.

Women stormed a meeting of the unemployed relief fund at the Sydney Town Hall called by the Lord Mayor and chaired by Governor Sir Phillip Game. From a mass demo outside Parliament House six of the women were arrested and jailed. In the jail at the week end they were allowed to see a film in with the other prisoners but refused to stand up for God Save the King. When threatened, they stood and sang The Red Flag at the top of their voices. The police and warders were shocked to the core. When one young woman was asked what her mother would say about it all she replied, 'Why don't you ask her? You put her in the next cell!'

An organisation called Workers International Relief had been set up in 1920 (WIR) and was known fondly as the Workers' Red Cross. Here on the South Coast, Corrimal was the centre of working-class activity and there was even a little WIR Hall in Robert Street, Corrimal, where unemployed organisations met and ran socials (each woman brought enough tea for the pot or a tiny bit of milk and sugar to share). They were so poor in material things but so rich in courage and spirit.

A demonstration and protest was held outside the dole office in Wollongong demanding more dole and a number of local women were arrested. Most of them had children clinging to their skirts. The establishment was horrified by this but never seemed to be horrified about the children starving. The dole office building is still there and is now the home of the Wollongong Historical Museum.

Unemployed workers, demanding more dole, marched from Wollongong to Bulli Court House in the pouring rain (most of them would have had cardboard in the soles of their sandshoes). Their 'womenfolk', as they were referred to, were to the fore and threatened with arrest.

During the 1930s women were active in the growing international peace movement and a new organisation was set

Illawarra Unity

up called the Movement Against War and Fascism (MAWF).

In 1935 an International Women's Day committee was functioning in Illawarra. By 1936 the International Women's Day Committee in Sydney had started drawing in wider women's organisations such as the women's section of the unemployed, Federation of Women Voters Equal Status for Women Committee, Cooperative Women's Guilds, United Associations of Women (whose leader was Lady Jessie Street), and others.

In 1938 Miners Women's Auxiliary branches were formed on the Northern coalfields — following the action taken by women at Wonthaggi during a big strike there.

In 1938 during a 'stay down' strike in Lambton BHP mine the company got police to stop food being taken to the men underground who were getting desperate. One night after dark about thirty women with bags over their shoulders crept towards the pit top. There was a skirmish with police and the women were chased down the hill by the police. While that was happening, a group of men sprinted to the pit top and threw bags of food down to the waiting miners. The bags the women carried were filled with rubbish. The age old ploy worked and later was credited with winning the strike.

A woman named Topsy Small, who later became an organiser for the Hotel, Club and Restaurant Union, told of going to a Domain meeting about the Spanish Civil war — an appeal was made for funds but she and her husband had nothing to give so they talked for a bit and agreed to put her wedding ring into the collection.

By the 1940s women were employed in war industries — including aircraft manufacture and maintenance (where they were paid less hourly rate than the men they trained) and in munitions. The Union covering them was the Sheet Metal Worker's Union and they soon were electing delegates and making demands for better pay and conditions.

Locally, women were employed at Lysaght's munition works (including delicate work on the famous Owen Sub-machine gun) and at Metal Manufacturers' Port Kembla works. More and more women were becoming unionised and were STILL campaigning for equal pay.

Their union here was the Federated Ironworkers Association. But when 'the men' came back from war women were moved out of industry.

In the 1945 steel strike women were at the forefront of activities for strike committees and in 1949 members of the Miner's Auxiliaries were caught up in the devastating coal strike of that year. Local Auxiliary members were at the marches and

Illawarra Unity

demonstrations in Sydney at State Parliament House during the campaign for workers' compensation for dusted miners. There was a well known story that a Corrimal miner named who , after his death had his lungs examined by researchers at Sydney University where they had to use a medical hacksaw to cut through the charcoal-looking deposits which were his dusted lungs. But they still had to fight like hell to get workers' compensation. Coal owners are not known for their benevolence.

Through the early 1950s, Seamen's Union and Waterside Worker's Women's Committees were being set up as well as branches of the Union of Australian Women. But changes were happening and more women went into the paid work force and became organised into various unions and the Women's Liberation movement so as the changes happened so some of the other, older organisations, folded. The Peace Movement of the Cold-War years ('ban the bomb') was hard , foot-slogging work for lots of women and was done in a very hostile period during John Howard's beloved Menzies era. Then the Vietnam war and anti-conscription moratorium marches and a strong local Save Our Sons committee — then Women's Liberation and always, always, still the fight for equal pay and the right to work AGAIN.

We should never forget the work of women in those early years when times were so hard and they and their families half starved and punishment harsh and there was so little joy.

Women today truly 'stand on a giant's shoulders'.

(Note: Some references are from interviews with women by Audrey Johnson.)