A stitch in time ...
.... experiences in the rag trade

— Betty Reilly

For many centuries, women and children have been associated with spinning and weaving in one form or another. But it wasn’t until mid-19th century capitalist development in Britain, when the old cottage-style, or domestic textile industry was replaced by mechanical devices, that they were congregated together in large factories.

New steam-driven machines promoted new divisions of labour and boosted production. This enabled employers to sack most males, with the exception of maintenance staff and overseers, and replace them with the much cheaper, flexible-fingered labour power of women, aged between 16 and 20, and children, many under the age of 10, who controlled all the processes of production.

The textile industry then held pride of place in British manufacture. But it soon became notorious for excessively long hours — up to 16 a day being common — incredibly cruel, unhealthy, sub-standard working conditions, near-zero wages and, of course, huge profits. In a nutshell, the period of capitalism’s greatest progress was the period of the most brutal, sadistic exploitation of the working class, and especially degrading to the human rights and dignity of women and defenceless children.

In An Outline of European History, Maurice Dobb has this to say about that period:

The employers utilised a law of Henry VIII which provided that parish officers were to put pauper children out to apprenticeship; and they had children despatched to them from London and elsewhere, to work in their mills nominally as apprentices, actually as indentured slaves. These wretched children were worked anything up to 16 hours a day, being kept awake on night work by the whips of overseers — heavy iron sticks known as “billy rollers” — or by plunging them in tubs of cold water, or if the employers were “humane” — by being made to sing psalms.

A physician’s report of the time declared that “the mill child has not a moment free
Textile workers

except for meal times, and never goes out into the fresh air except on its way to them. The factory system in Bradford has engendered a multitude of cripples".

However, by the time the textile industry was transplanted from the Old Dart to Australia, trade union action and factory legislation had largely curtailed these cruel excesses and the 8-hour day had been legalised. Nevertheless, as we shall see, wages and working conditions in most Australian mills continued to chug along the old institutionalised Dickensian path.

The depression of the 1930s hit textiles badly. Many Australian plants either closed down or operated at half-mast. Unemployment was rife. Paradoxically, World War II was the lynch-pin for the industry's revival. By April 1940 both the sixth and seventh army divisions had been recruited and sent overseas. Huge and profitable government cost-plus contracts for supplying the armed forces began flooding in to stimulate the textile industry as never before.

Simultaneously, through government-sponsored regulations (The Female Minimum Rates Regulations and the Women's Employment Board [WEB]), women's wages began rising from a low of 54 percent of the male basic wage to 75 percent, and up to 100 percent of the male rate in many industries previously closed to females, transport, for example. But women returning to textiles, a traditional female labour industry, were expected to survive rising living costs on a miserly 54 percent of the male basic wage — not even the basic rate.

And because the textile industry had been declared under national manpower (sic) regulations as essential to war production, our wages were pegged and we were prevented from seeking jobs elsewhere for more dough. The imposition of this form of economic conscription played right into the hands of greedy textile barons, fully determined to resist all attempts to alter existing wage rates.

Communists in industry

When war started in September 1939 not too many communists were to be found in the textile industry. But the few stalwarts like Lindsay Mountjoy, Bob and Joyce Batterham and several others, aimed to unionise the industry; to encourage the plugs to unite and fight for wage hikes and humane working conditions; for more frequent union meetings and to democratise union elections.

And in June 1941 when Hitler lashed out at the Soviet Union, followed closely by the Japanese Pearl Harbour horror, our agitation and propaganda was broadened. We now emphasised the changed character of the war and called for national unity and an intensified war effort by all working people; we also urged the union and government to increase pressure on the textile bosses to lift wages and amend the deplorable working situation, then assessed as a national blot.

But apparently our propaganda didn't cut too much ice with the majority of textile workers and, towards the end of 1941, and again in February 1943, they thumbed their noses at all and sundry, three in their billies and went out to grass.

My involvement with textiles began during the 1941 strike. Being unemployed, I offered my services to the Newtown Strike Committee and assisted in the collection of money and food for family relief.

Maybe that strike inspired me to help
change the complexion of the textile industry. For shortly after, young, enthusiastic, politically green with a starry-eyed dedication to the Communist Party, Joe Stalin and the war effort, I joined the underpaid at Bond’s Knitting Mills in Camperdown. There, I quickly cottoned on to the meaning of rabid exploitation; and to what Karl Marx meant when he talked about a class of wage-earners with neither property nor hope of acquiring any — a class which in his phrase “had only its chains to lose”.

At Bonds, for just over two pounds weekly, we were expected each day to slip silk waste from 1,728 stockings before being eligible for a bonus. Although not actually muzzled, silence combined with heads down and bums up was the unofficial order of the day. Needless to say, several of us failed to meet these austere requirements. And before the euphoria of reaching bonus level came, the little note in the light-on pay-packet arrived dispensing with our services — minus the golden handshake. And as union fees at Bonds were deducted from wages and paid directly to the organiser in the bosses’ office, no job delegates were around to question our dismissal or to intervene on our behalf.

Nothing daunted, I trudged over to the Australian Woollen Mills (AWM) in Marrickville and signed on as a doffer — mounting and taking down large bobbins — in the section spinning wool into yarn for Yankee soldiers’ uniforms. If the going was tough at Bonds, it took all my staying power to remain put at the AWM, despite coercive ball-and-chain manpower regulations.

At the AWM, 75 percent of the workforce were women, many the wives of enlisted servicemen rearing young families alone, and teenage girls on starvation wages. We adults yackered long exhausting hours — up to 12 daily — for the princely sum of £2/16/9 weekly including overtime.

Not having been cleaned since the era of elastic-sided boots and straw-decker hats, the huge departments in the plant were dark,
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dismal and depressing, with overhead water sprays and underfoot hot water pipes keeping the concrete floor damp and the atmosphere moist. The ventilation was poor, the noise deafening and the place lacked stools, lockers, lunchroom, canteen and had inadequate toilet and washing facilities.

The rate of TB was high, colds, chest complaints, stress, fatigue and undernourishment were common. Standing up constantly resulted in varicose veins and swollen feet. And, for years after leaving textiles, my hands were plagued with frequent outbreaks of dermatitis.

**Occupational health**

Occupational health hazards, now recognised and compensated for, like bysinosis, a disease resembling silicosis of cotton workers, were also prevalent. Add this not inconsiderable little lot to no paid annual leave, sick leave or long service leave, and a picture emerges comparable with the squalid conditions in cruel mid-19th century British capitalism.

In contrast to Bonds' company union set-up, members at the AWM were scarcer than the proverbial duck's dentures. So, securing a receipt book and membership cards from headquarters, I set about getting the joint organised. And in two flips of a tiger's tail, the plugs in my and adjacent rooms were into the union and rearing to go. Being suitably impressed, the union organiser exemplified the lack of elementary democracy in the union by appointing me shop steward and not calling a meeting to let the plugs decide.

Nevertheless, a petition demanding a canteen, stools, change rooms, better ventilation and other urgent needs, circulated on the day, afternoon and night shifts, was highly successful. When presented by a departmental deputation, the startled manager couldn't believe his eyes and began the interview by questioning the authenticity of the thousand or so signatures.

Meanwhile, the union hierarchy, under job pressure and fearing another strike like the Black Death, had got their act together. A new log of claims was presented calling for an increase of six bob weekly in the male rate; the adult female rate to be 90 percent of the male rate, and a 20 percent increase for juniors.

Although not yet in force, the bosses had already agreed to one week's annual leave, one week's sick pay, and increased rates for certain classes of work. But the wage claims were well on the way to grief. When first presented to Justice O'Mara and given the arse by him, they were then referred to the full Arbitration Court on the question of whether an anomaly existed in respect to female rates because of a decision by the WEB which had fixed the female rate at up to 90 percent of the male rate.

The full Arbitration Court decided that there was no anomaly in respect to female rates and the union's claims were referred back to Mr Justice "boss-aligned" O'Mara, so began the dickering and farting-around saga, so typical of class-biased arbitration courts to this very day.

Time marched on and with it the growing frustration and anger among women at the court's delay in finalising our new award. A delay especially irksome to women still trying to scrape along on 54 percent of the male basic wage, knowing that their relatives and friends performing comparable tasks in nearby factories were receiving 75 and up to 100 percent of the male rate.

Well, how do you think they felt? They obviously felt like a Tooheys because, in February 1943, a thousand or so women spontaneously stormed out of the Alexandria Spinning Mills in defiance of the boss, the union and the government. The women immediately elected a strike committee and scouts were soon outside the AWM calling on us to join them. But, due mainly to my influence, "Winnie the War Winners" were in the majority at the AWM and my workmates shouted back "what about the war effort" and continued to work. The strike's spontaneity took everyone by surprise. But support for it was patchy and confined to women only in several large woolen and cotton plants.

Men who took over from women for the
night shift refused to join the strike and the knitting mills refused to be involved. However, in one case, 70 men were thrown idle because wool and basil workers declared the wool “black”. Members of the Wool and Basil Workers’ Union had decided during a previous dispute that where men handled machines usually operated by women they would not supply the wool.

The union top brass quickly moved in ordering the women back to work; old O’Mara danced up and down and stopped hearing our claims; the Labor government threatened to fine and/or jail workers absenteeing themselves from work; and the bosses took advantage of the situation to withdraw the gains already achieved.

But the women, angry and tenacious, were not to be intimidated by threats of reprisals. It took three mass meetings, plus assistance from Eddie Ward, then federal Minister for Labour, and Jock Garden, Liaison officer between the government and unions, before agreement was reached under protest to “return to work with no confidence in the union executive and we ask the Labor Council to inquire into the conduct of the strike”.

As for me, I’d be the only woman on record who took the count at the Leichhardt Stadium for proposing to hundreds of irate workers that we return to work in the interests of defeating fascism.

What was the main issue?

Stable doors are quickly banged after the nags have bolted. But we certainly chalked up a few errors like — losing sight of policy on industrial disputes — best expressed at the time by Tom Wright, member of the CPA Central Committee and NSW secretary of the
Sheet Metal Workers' Union. He had this to say in March 1943 to Justice O'Mara in the Arbitration Court concerning the employers of 20 factories trying to dodge a decision of the WEB to award women 90 percent of the male rate:

While pledging ourselves to avoid stoppages of work which can only be harmful to the war effort, we warn the employers concerned that there is a strong feeling among women employees about the delay and that further delays will lead to serious disputes for which the employers will bear full responsibility.

A nicely balanced statement indicating political nous and flexibility in handling complex situations.

In contrast, we tended to over-emphasise uninterrupted production for the war effort, causing lines of communication with workmates to foul up. In turn, we lost sight of the main issue — the feelings of deep resentment among women who daily saw themselves getting poorer and farther behind in the thrust for more bread.

In general, our propaganda and tactics remained fairly static and confusing instead of being updated. For example, calling on the plugs to get into the union and fight while appealing for an uninterrupted war effort.

In retrospect, we should have been out in front giving positive leadership to textile workers in the 1941 and 1943 strikes. The arrogant "Pomme" bosses should have been thumped hard for holding up war production by stalling on wage increases. Crafty old O'Mara who was aiding and abetting the bosses by seeking loopholes in women's wage rates regulations should have been exposed; the Labor Party, then in government, should have been called upon to honour its pledge to the International Labour Organisation that, if elected to office, it would legislate for wage parity. And the rightwing union top bananas should have been soundly indicted for their outright opposition to both strikes, their boss collaboration over the years, and their complacency and callous indifference to the workers' needs.

Had we so acted then, assuredly women textile workers would have received at least 75 percent of the male rate for the job instead of the lousy 60 percent of the male basic wage reluctantly meted out to them by O'Mara's boss-biased court in April 1943.

That was part of the action almost 40 years ago. Women in textiles now have the rate for the job — but what a rate! Spinners last year were getting roughly 167 bucks weekly, or around 4 bucks hourly. Weavers, considered the industry's aristocrats, were getting slightly
more. Compare this token with the average weekly wage for males in NSW in June 1981 of 294-odd bucks and you get a real rat-shit rate for the job in the textile industry.

The major responsibility for this mockery of wage parity rests with the largely male-dominated rightwing union tall poppies. Their fear of struggle and strife with the bosses over the years has dominated their thinking. Now, it dictates their reluctance to fight to reduce the ever-widening gap between lower and higher paid industrial workers.

Women workers have a responsibility too, despite ethnic differences and language problems relatively non-existent until after World War II: responsibilities like becoming more knowledgeable and vocal about the policies and aims of their union; more assertive about their right to adequate wage rates; employment conditions suitable to domestic requirements; and being more aware and demanding of their right to proportional representation on job and union committees for the airing and realisation of particular needs.

From the very beginning of the modern textile industry, production has been handled effectively, and extremely profitably, in the main, by adult and junior women. We can be thoroughly optimistic about a future when the whole textile caboose — including management and administration — will be added to the control women already exercise over all the processes of plant production.