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### **Abstract**

I thought I'd start off talking about the political context. In 1972 the Whitlam Government was elected and immediately brought in sweeping and progressive reforms. The reforms included many benefits for women. Many women took advantage of the Whitlam Government's free tertiary education policy to enrol at University where in the past they would not have had the opportunity. University Courses changed to an extent. There were courses which had been unheard of before, such as women's studies, etc.

## Wollongong Women's Information Centre: The Early Days

### **Speech by Irene Arrowsmith delivered to Forum of Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History on 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2001**

I thought I'd start off talking about the political context. In 1972 the Whitlam Government was elected and immediately brought in sweeping and progressive reforms. The reforms included many benefits for women. Many women took advantage of the Whitlam Government's free tertiary education policy to enrol at University where in the past they would not have had the opportunity. University Courses changed to an extent. There were courses which had been unheard of before, such as women's studies, etc.

In 1975 the United Nations Organisation declared that year as International Women's Year and gave a boost to the women's movement all over the world. *(You get sick of using the word "movement" all the time.)* The impetus for a new type of women's organisation with new aims and demands came mostly from America as had International Women's Day which originated from the women garment worker's strike all those years ago in New York. Most of the literature about women's lib and actions started to come from America and of course we had our own people here, like



Irene (right) pouring tea at the opening of the WWIC

Germaine Greer. In Europe, especially France, there was a movement too.

The women's organisations, which had been around for many years, although politically progressive, were quite conservative and most strove to be seen as "respectable", even though their activities were quite radical. 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. It seems as if the coming three years will be the same since the election of the Howard Government for a third term when Howard himself will have no restraints, and he won't care because he's going.

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 - this split carried through into the women's movement.

The Communist Party had supported the Women's Liberation movement. The new Socialist Party clung to the old, more conservative, ideas. Many organisations such as the Union of Australian Women (which was also affiliated to the WWIF and had strong international links) the various trade union women's committees and auxiliaries who had been a back stop for their husbands, scorned Women's Liberation and refused to take part in many of the campaigns.

Unfortunately, during the Bob Menzies era and the stultifying and frightening effects of the cold war these older women's groups felt under pressure to prove that they were respectable even though their policies and actions were radical. Now, younger women didn't care [about respectability] and enjoyed a bit of notoriety.

The Illawarra did not have as much bitterness [from the political splits] as the capital cities and in the end we were all able to work together.

It was a time when women were returning to the paid work force and to University and even trying to break through the iron curtain of middle aged white males who had control of who would get pre-selection to stand for a seat in Parliament. These men were not about to give up their positions of power and allow "bloody sheilas" into their sacred and cosy parliamentary havens. Still don't.

To break through the barriers women could see they had to

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be radical and outrageous. They paid for their actions in many ways and were severely ridiculed and ostracised in the media. Which happens to anything new doesn't it? Actions like bra burning were portrayed as the main activity of women's liberation and the wonderful symbolism of bra burning was ignored. Why I wonder was the establishment so fearful of ordinary women? Did they see their power being undermined?

Because so many women were returning to the work force (even in unwomanly occupations such as construction workers, industrial apprenticeships etc.) they began to form groups for various campaigns. Organisations like the UAW (Union of Australian Women) went ahead with campaigns on the prices of groceries, there were other organisations like CARP (Campaign Against Rising Prices); it was a different era. I was in CARP. One of the early, fairly successful organisations was the Working Women's Charter which was a national body and a spin off from the trade unions. They held a national conference in Sydney over about four days and our local group was part of this. It was held at the University of Sydney. I was there, 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. The local branch had the support of the South Coast Labour Council but did not really have much effect on working women, or even penetrate the ideas of the unions, because most unions had male leadership and were nervous of women "taking men's jobs" with their perception that women were not real workers and were only temporary in the work place. (For example when I worked in the Miscellaneous Workers office, they had a very militant section. I remember a general meeting, and 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.) So, the Working Women's Charter group resolved to set up a centre in Wollongong to serve the needs of women in general. For months we were caught up in the formality and processes of setting up the centre, especially as we would need grants from the various government instrumentalities.

One of the driving forces from the beginning was a Labor Party activist, Ruby Makula, who worked hard to gain the support of every Labor Party branch in the Illawarra and to put pressure

on local members of Parliament for their support. Ruby was great and much loved by the women at the centre. She later died of breast cancer and was greatly mourned.

Submissions were laboriously compiled and the new pro tem executive committee met with Carmel Niland (at that time a bureaucrat, Women's Adviser, employed by the Wran Government) who helped us with details about submissions, whether to be a collective or a co-operative etc. etc. We had to cope with all new things, things that were new to most of us.

All this was new to most of us and it was easy to get tied up in red tape. But we were soon proficient in drawing up submissions for grants to cover such things as getting a house (for the centre), buying such things as furniture, money for rent and salaries for paid workers. This became essential when we decided that we should have a woman doctor at the centre who shared our feminist ideals and hopes for a new view of women's health and needs. We wanted a doctor who could deal with taboo subjects such as sexuality, contraception and abortion and other things women found difficult or even impossible to discuss with most male doctors.

Beverley Mielczarek, an organiser with the Miscellaneous Workers' Union was the first treasurer and kept us all in check. Later, like Ruby Makula, Bev died from breast cancer and was a sad loss.

It was hard, hard work and even after we managed to get an old, tumbledown house from the Wollongong City Council for a peppercorn rent (we received the keys in November 1979) the house itself had to be made presentable and clean. Many of the women worked so hard at this, days, nights and weekends. Exhausting, but fun. I seem to remember they found a treasure trove of history in the old newspapers from the 1920s and 1930s that were under the old lino. Forget time capsules - old lino is the way to go to get real history. Nowadays of course with cement block foundations, carpet underlays and board floors this will all be gone. But now we have microfilm of the old newspapers and magazines although it doesn't have the same excitement as the old lino treasury.

January 1980 saw the first meeting of the centre's management committee. The centre health committee was elected. The first coordinator (Sherrie Escobar) was appointed and on April 12th, 1980 the centre was officially opened. It was quite a festive occasion blessed by the Mayor, Frank Arkell, and Stewart West the local Federal Member of Parliament. There were crowds of women from different nationalities there, which was very satisfying. It was a new format for things, new people. When you

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went to the women's centre you didn't have to get dressed properly. Because there were 'terrible' looking people there ... it was so good. Even the food was different. New stuff, no longer just Saos with tomatoes and cheese, but homous and tabbouli and other extraordinary goodies. Heaven! New Heaven!

Meantime, while all the physical toil, the meetings, the discussion and the talk, talk, talk (and arguments) was going on, there were lots of actions, marches, demonstrations and successful campaigns. One of these was the launch of the "jobs for women" campaign. Women chained themselves to Parliament House gates and an encampment was set up outside Lysaghts works by the women in that group. Later they became autonomous and after years of action and trauma were successful in Court. But others can tell about that later, I'm supposed to stick to the beginning.

Though we were labelled man-haters and anti-child because of our work on the availability of contraception and abortion - in my memory the centre always seemed to ring with the voices, laughter and demanding cries of the babies and toddlers who were there with their loving mums. At the same time we had quite a number of young, radical, lesbian women members who were active in all our demonstrations and protests. Although there were probably some places in Sydney where lesbians got together over particular interests, etc., I think our Wollongong Women's Centre must have been one of the few venues where they were just part of the membership and felt comfortable and at ease. It is strange, looking back all those years how much hostility was directed to these women simply because of their sexuality. Things have moved on of course and those women have claimed and won their rights to acceptance in the community - well ... a few rights!

One of a kind our centre was then. Looking back, one must wonder how we did it. Most of us worked or studied full-time and many had families and not much money but there... - women are known for their tenacity in overcoming challenges as in the words of the Helen Reddy song of that era, "I am woman, I am invincible". But the words I like are from an older song, "we want bread but we want roses too".