

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

March 8th. is International Women's Day, the day on which, throughout the world, women unite to make known their specific concerns and demands. Its celebration was inaugurated in 1910 by the Second International Conference of Socialist Women, whose delegates were inspired by the demonstrations and strikes in the preceding years of American women garment workers, protesting against social injustices to women and their appalling working conditions. In 1978 the United Nations called for universal observance of March 8th. as a special day for women.

I.W.D. was first celebrated in Australia in 1928 and meetings were already being held on the South Coast in the early thirties: Workers Weekly records an open air meeting in Wollongong in 1931 and a working women's conference in Corrimal in 1935, largely devoted to the issues of women's employment and peace. The South Coast I.W.D. Committee is recognized as having the longest continuous serving record of any in Australia. "One way or another", writes a commentator, "whether it be in a hired hall with catering or at someone's home with "bring a plate", Wollongong women have celebrated I.W.D. with a luncheon and guest speaker since 1938". Scarborough Miners' Women's Auxiliary claim the distinction of having hosted the first luncheon in 1938.

In those early days, the women were largely concerned with working conditions not only for themselves but for the whole workforce. Apart from perennial demand for equal pay, they demanded a basic wage for the unemployed, an eight-hour day for shop girls and annual holidays on full pay. In 1936, alarm over the threat of fascism and of war drew together members of various women's organizations and a broadly based membership of I.W.D. developed.

Although I.W.D. lapsed during the war years it was not forgotten; a conference was held in Wollongong in 1944 and meetings started again in 1946. A highlight of the fifties was the visit to Wollongong, as guest speaker, of Mrs. Evatt, wife of the then Federal Leader of the Opposition, Dr. Evatt. She urged women to

become politically minded, to see that Australian children enjoyed a full, free and happy life and to work for world peace.

Since 1959 regular accounts of speakers, venues and attendance at South Coast I.W.D. functions have been kept in carefully preserved Visitors Books, unique and invaluable sources of information on the South Coast Branch's history and progress. Since the early sixties the I.W.D. Committee has presented, each year, a shawl to the first baby girl born in Wollongong Hospital on March 8th.

During the sixties a number of resolutions were passed at the annual luncheons demonstrating women's concern over radical violence, social injustice, threats to international peace and aboriginal rights. Each year bus loads of South Coast women joined with Sydney women on March 8th. to celebrate achievements, to make known women's views on international affairs, to publicize the social and economic injustices they suffered and to demand action to redress them.

With the seventies came great impetus in the push for women's rights from the Womens Liberation Movement. Problems such as rape, domestic violence and the right to abortion were publicly aired and women demanded public recognition of them. Women were also asserting their rights as individuals to education, to careers and to choices in their lifestyles and refusing to be bamboozled by centuries of stereotyping into accepting their traditional, domestic roles as the the only possible way of life for them.

1975 was proclaimed International Women's Year by the United Nations, the opening of a decade in which the U.N. recommended that governments should recognize women's social and economic disadvantages and attempt to reduce them.

In 1977, the South Coast I.W.D. Committee sponsored an art competition with the theme " The Role of Women in Society " with the aim of discovering what people thought about the role of women in society and also to bring out differences in cultural backgrounds and show how migrant women adapt themselves to Australian conditions. In 1978, the guest speaker, Anne Deveson, spoke in Wollongong of her work on the Royal Commission into Human Relationships and the need for anti-discrimination legislation. 1979 was a milestone for the South Coast I.W.D. when it held its first march and issued its first broadsheet, featuring the A.C.T.U. Working Women's Charter, Aboriginal women's rights, the exploitation of migrant women in the workforce, rape, occupational health and sexism in education. In 1980 another march was held and a broadsheet issued on employment and working conditions for women, including sexual harassment.

Aboriginal women have joined with white women on the South Coast in celebration of I.W.D. Monica Clare, herself of Aboriginal descent, was I.W.D. Secretary during the sixties and in 1968 a Torres Strait Islander, Dulcie Flowers, a nursing sister and a member of the Aboriginal Progressive Association, was guest speaker at the annual luncheon. The luncheon coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations and Ms Flowers spoke on what the Declaration meant for her people. The function was attended by Aboriginal women and men from the Wreck Bay settlement. The double disadvantages suffered by Aboriginal women, being black and female, are featured in the 1979 broadsheet. In 1980, I.W.D.'s guest speaker Pat O'Shane, Australia's first Aboriginal woman barrister, spoke in Wollongong on " Aborigines and the Law ". In 1988, I.W.D. entertained several Aboriginal women as guest speakers, who described to the meeting their varied experiences as black women growing up on the South Coast.

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