

PLOD ESSAY: May Day

Lyn Chambers was amongst a group of Wonthaggians, who in March 2006, travelled down to Melbourne to the launch of the book, *Cups with No Handles*, at the Victorian Women's Trust. The book was a memoir of Bette Boyanton, a "grassroots activist" whom Joan Kirner described as one of the "warriors." The Wonthaggi women there were also "warriors" and understood the meaning of the Life being described in the book.

Much to the amazement of the organisers of the event, the room filled to bursting, the crowd spilling over so people were standing around the desks in the office

and squeezing into nooks and crannies. Many in the crowd were older women, who had fought for social justice and equal opportunity, who were the founders of progressive groups focused on improving the lot of people everywhere; many had shared the hardships of strikes and participated in

protests with their Unionist husbands. When proceedings were over and the book launched, the women began to share memories of active militancy with each other.

Lyn Chambers was flushed with excitement. She had been an active member of the Miner's Women's Auxiliary and the Mother's Club in Wonthaggi in the 1950s and had never forgotten her roots. She said on the way home after the launch, "This has been a wonderful day. It was almost like being at a May Day March, talking over ideas, successes and failures. Wonderful friends there... I may never see them again."

Since 1886, May 1st has been the true workers' day around the world, a time when workers and their organizations remember the sacrifices the working class has made to gain what it has and to renew the call for struggle to rebuild the movement.

May Day marches in Victoria started in 1893 and continue to this day. The Mine Workers of Wonthaggi made their way down to Trades Hall in Melbourne on the first of May for six decades.

People assembled at Trades Hall, the world's oldest Trade Union building, built by the workers. It is located on the corner of Lygon and Victoria Streets just north of Melbourne's CBD and across the road from the eight-hour-day monument which was erected to honour the Victorian workers who won the first 8 hour working day in the world in 1856. The march, when it started, would work its way through the city towards the banks of the Yarra where people would set up soap boxes and make speeches about the union movement in general and specific grievances in particular.

The *Powlett Express* reported in 1937 that, "Six

buses and several private cars were used to convey more than 200 marchers from Wonthaggi to Melbourne for the May Day Procession on Sunday. The procession was very successful and the Wonthaggi contingent was well received over the whole route.

"On the way to Melbourne the busses stopped at Dandenong while

slogans were tied to the sides. The buses attracted considerable attention while passing through the city streets.

"The procession marched from Trades Hall to the Yarra Bank, where May Day speakers erected platforms. Although hundreds of people were seeking it, a platform from which to state the miner's case was not erected until late in the day. Arrangements were made and speeches given dealing with the Wonthaggi situation."

The miners from Wonthaggi that year drew a great deal of attention because it was less than four months since the 20-Shaft disaster which people had been reading about in newspapers throughout the world.

In 1939, while many went down to Melbourne, others stayed in Wonthaggi to join a local march. They paraded down McBride Avenue, along Murray Street and up Billson Street into Graham Street. The International situation inspired some of the banners, while members of the Communist Party wore red rosettes and marched behind the hammer and sickle flag. The Citizens' Band played and representatives of the Miners'



Women's Auxiliary marched behind them. Speeches were made in the Union Theatre.

In 1942 at the beginning of World War II, the miners celebrated May Day by, "hewing Coal for the war effort." This was a decision made by the Union. The *Express* printed the following: "In handing in their birth-right Wonthaggi workers have proved their sincerity in an all-in war effort. This is the first time since the opening of the mine that Wonthaggi has worked on May Day." The miners continued to work on May Day throughout the war but in 1945 when "International working class unity ha[d] reached a new high level"; Wonthaggi workers downed tools and celebrated May Day for the first time in three years.

It was a momentous event. The *Express* out did itself in its reportage:

"May Day, 1945, will be one of the most momentous in history. It will celebrate the end of Nazism and the assured downfall of Japanese Fascism. Although much fighting and suffering remains to be faced, it will celebrate at least, the beginning of the end – the certainty that the long years of bloodshed and tears are drawing to a close. It will honour the much [sic] heroism and sacrifices of the peoples [sic] of the United Nations."

Although, people continued to go to May Day marches down in Melbourne after the war, the day seemed to take on more importance locally. In 1946 there was a procession through the main streets headed by Jim Birt, President of the Union and the May Day Committee, who lead the marchers past the recreation reserve where a great day of sporting competition was to be held after the political proceedings.

Mr Birt was waving the red flag and was followed by the "smartly dressed" Citizens' Band. Behind the band, W.G. McKenzie, Minister for Mines and Agriculture, was walking with the Mayor, Cr Adam Keltie. These two gentlemen were followed by the school children, who were displaying the hanging of an Arbitration Court Judge. The Fire Brigade engine came next draped with the Union Jack with the uniformed firemen walking in step behind. According to the *Express*,

the Workmen's Club float that came next caused much "longing and laughter" for it depicted five thirsty fellows sitting around enjoying a pot of "fair dinkum stuff" and a pleasant yarn. The Adelyn factory float, which won the prize for the best decorated float that year, was followed by "neatly dressed" basket-ballplayers from the factory. Then came the Co-op Store's float, which told of the store's progress over the past generation. Finally, came the banner section with people holding up pleas for housing and other necessities needed in Wonthaggi.

A large crowd followed the procession to the Reserve where the Sports that always happened every May Day would be held. Wood chopping seemed to be the most exciting event. All the

champions were present and after a day of heats and finals, as many as 200 people took a chance at getting the 2 ½ ton of wood left over after the chop. There were professional bike races, too, and foot-running with teacher, Clarrie Wilson, winning the 100-yards May Day Handicap, "hands down."

In the 1950s May Day marches in Melbourne became very important in an attempt to combat the anti-communist propaganda of the Menzies era and to uplift the Union movement. The streets in the city filled with workers, singing chant-

ing, waving banners, trying to get their point across. Inevitably, given the times, the marchers lost their fervour, but when the Vietnam War protests began it was revived. When Whitlam came to power and then was sacked, the people poured into the streets once again.

The marches go on, sometimes filling the city streets with one cause or another, sometimes not. They now go to treasury place for their speech making instead of the banks of the Yarra. No matter what the cause, it is always an inspiring experience to be a part of a people's movement even if you watch from afar.

Nowadays this unique town does not stop work for May Day, but many here still celebrate it in their own way.

