

PLOD ESSAY: Wonthaggi Women's Solidarity

"When, in 1934, the wives of striking Wonthaggi Miners formed their own broad committee to support the strike, Australian history was made," wrote Noel Maud in the *Sentinel Times* April 1988.

During the five-months strike in 1934, the militant miners at the Wonthaggi State Coal Mine took over control of the strike organisation and formed, for the first time in Australian union history, a broad committee (comprising of all sections of the union) for relief funds, entertainment and propaganda.

Under the direction of Arthur Asquith and Tom Currie, sixty volunteers formed into sub-committees operating from the Miners' Union Theatre. After the June elections, the women were asked to help. So they formed a women's broad committee and cooperated with the men in relief, especially for children and mothers.

In less than a week after it was formed, the ladies relief committee, as it was first known, helped more than 100 families and each day the number of 'necessitous' cases brought under their notice grew.

According to a *Powlett Express* reporter covering the relief effort of men's and women's broad committees at the Union Theatre, "The ladies stated with pride that they are 100 percent behind their men and are not ashamed to admit it.

"The ladies were suddenly interrupted by another helper who held up six big reels of cotton which one of the local tailors had just sent across to help in patching and mending.

"And please don't forget to mention we want more assistance yet," were the parting words of the ladies as our representative moved on."

The *Express* reporter described a boot repair depot at the Union where six cobblers drawn from the miners' ranks repaired piles of boots and shoes: "We've only been going since Saturday morning, but we've done 30 pairs already and there's another 20 pairs over there waiting," the foreman said with a jerk of his head in the direction of a long row of footwear

spread along two shelves. He slipped the shoe in his hand over the last, picked up his hammer and bent down over his job."

There was a hairdressing and barbering saloon where nearly 400 men, women and children had their hair trimmed in the two and a half days it had been operating. "Four ex-barbers who were engaged as volunteers and decked out in white coats, were making a good job of it."

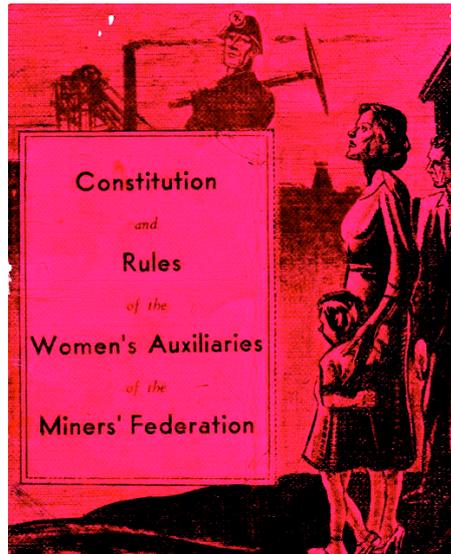
Men and women of the broad committees set about distributing food twice a week: 1100 loaves of bread, 1000lbs of meat (from a bullock donated by Banks Bros.), 3 tonnes of potatoes, 50 dozen tins of jam, 4-dozen tins of treacle, 700lbs dripping and many rabbits. On Fridays they distributed fish instead of meat. Vegetables such as pumpkins, carrots and parsnips were on hand.

They expected many more rabbits as "twenty rabbiters went out and were expected to return with a good catch and another twenty workers went out to chop firewood at Pommy Town."

While the men butchered the meat, chopped the wood, dug potatoes, mended shoes and cut hair, the women sewed clothing, raised money for cloth and food, clothing for babies and expectant mothers. The women also ran concerts to raise funds for relief and also to entertain the people waiting with their gunny-bags to get their rations.

The thirty-five founding members of the Women's Committee also set about educating other women on mine issues. Their earliest struggle was to stop government from using miners' wives to help break prolonged strikes as it had in the past. In order to promote propaganda that would win the strike for their men, the women as well as the men, had to speak at meetings, and even at the factory gates to explain the strike issues and ask for assistance. Thus the women began to acquire skills other than home duties, such as conducting and organising meetings. And, in fact, such as creating a whole new political movement!

After the '34 strikes, the women formed themselves into the Miners' Women's Auxiliary. It was the first women's group of its kind and



inspired union wives to form similar auxiliaries in coal coalfields throughout the world.

September 1937, in the Union paper, *The Common Cause*, there appeared an article on Women's Auxiliaries entitled 'Wonthaggi Branch Statement'. Here is part of it:

"The Wonthaggi Women's Auxiliary already has about 50 paying members, who are paying 6d per month to establish a fighting fund.

"Here are six reasons why Women's Auxiliaries are necessary:

- Because, as women, we are vitally concerned in the struggle of our menfolk;
- Because we women have to administrate our domestic homes in accordance with the standard of wages our menfolk receive;
- Because our social standard is dependent upon the standard of wages and conditions our menfolk labour under;
- Because we know that unity is strength, therefore, unity means organised expression and a combining of expressed opinion – strength means might of organisation, the will to win and raise the living standard of the working class;
- Because we are conscious of the part women can play in the broad struggles of the workers;
- Because we should realise the need to stand shoulder to shoulder with our menfolk and that women are loyal fighters in the class struggle, fully realising that women are better organisers and more diplomatic administrators in supplying the people with their needs."

- Helen Hamill, Sec'y

Apart from supporting their husbands during strikes, the women became a leading force in fighting for various women's amenities in Wonthaggi. As time went by, they were more and more overt about their need to help themselves and assert their independence. Their focus was always social justice. "They lobbied hard and long for a maternity wing at the Miners' Hospital, a comfort station for mothers coming into town and a kindergarten.

"By cooperating with others on working committees all these amenities were eventually obtained making the Wonthaggi Women's Auxiliary broader in scope than other similar mining town organisations." (*Sentinel Times* April 1988.)

It wasn't all work and no play for the Auxiliary. Aside from serious political struggles

the women continued to put on variety shows in the Union Theatre right until the closing of the last mine in 1968.

Lyn Chambers, member of the Auxiliary and daughter-in-law of founding member, Agnes Foster Chambers, remembers those variety shows with fondness:

"Quite a number of the Auxiliary members would perform. I remember Ivy White used to mimic Snuzzle Durant, you know, with the big nose and everything. She'd put on quite an act. And there was Mr Hicks who used to play a squeeze box and once he started to play, we couldn't get him to stop and the old people would be sitting there nodding off to sleep, and so and it was that Agnes Perlow, who was always in the kitchen said, 'I know what we'll do. We'll put him last before we serve supper and when we've had enough, we'll take the supper out.' Because he loved his food! And that's what we did. There was another chap who belonged to the Workman's Club, but he would come with the pensioners and he'd always sing the 'Slow Boat to China' and he would get slower and slower. Mr Hicks was a pensioner and Danny, who sang, was, too. Another pensioner named Fanny used to play the fiddle. Meg Foster used to sing Scottish songs and her husband would recite Scottish poems. When my mother-in-law was alive, she used to recite, too. And then we just had community singing. Joe [Chambers, Lyn's husband] would help with that. Of course, the men didn't come to the meetings, but there were a lot of old pensioner men in the concert.

"Once a year we used to have a break up picnic. We'd cut sandwiches, and this particular year I remember, it was Mavis McLeod had a house at Harmers Haven beside Eddie Harmer's place. Eddie's wife said, 'Oh Eddie's made a lovely path right down to the beach. Come and have the picnic there.' So, we went and we all walked down Eddie's path and some of the husbands came. I know Joe came with me. And there was a sign writer – the one who did the Union Banner. He was so taken with this lovely little path down to the beach that Eddie had made that he went and got a lump of wood and he wrote *Harmer's Haven* on it. Eddy was so pleased with it that he hung it up on his front fence and there it stayed. And when the Borough of Wonthaggi wanted to name the area because it was developing, they saw this sign and that's what it was named."