

WOMEN MINERS AND MINERS' WOMEN: THEIR ACTIVISM IN THE 1952 STAY-DOWN STRIKE

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at part of a larger study on women miners and miners' women in Queensland; this part focuses on women's early activist struggles in the 1952 Stay down strike in Deansville,¹ Queensland. The research question we asked was whether in industrial disputes these activists, mining women, were passive supporters of an agenda set by men, or whether they initiated and defined their own forms of resistance? We want to compose an historic snapshot, from which we hope to identify a before-and-after reference point, for comparison with recent mining women's activism. This will enable us to test the hypothesis that this older generation of women acted primarily as supporters of their men's activism and therefore reflect the gender conservatism of 1950s Australia. Our findings from the 113 interviews and secondary sources suggest that the hypothesis is largely true, women activists took supportive rather than initiating roles but within this exceedingly gendered culture women were able to create their own organizations of resistance and carve out unique responses to a very difficult living situation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The research question we asked, of the mining women and the available secondary sources for this project *Miners' women and women miners*, was about the role of women in the 1952 Deansville industrial dispute. We wanted to know whether women activists were 'really expected or allowed to take a central role alongside men in the political struggle' (Williams, 1981) or rather, were they 'supposed to minister to men's and children's needs (Thönnessen, 1973). We wanted to compose a historical snapshot of women's role in these coal mining communities, when fights with management around the industrial disputes were frequent and arduous for families and we wanted to see how unique women's responses were in the setting up women's groups such as the women's auxiliary and/or the AUW (i.e. Australia Union of Women). Were these genuinely distinctive female responses to industrial disputes or were women, following a male defined template that ignored the separate needs of women and children?

Other aspects of the literature that interested us was the perceived barriers to women's social, familial and occupational advancement that are seen as either class related (Bryson, 1975), or as part of a wider patriarchal pattern of sexism (Cass, 1978; Reskin & Roos, 1987), or as both (Williams, 1981). Claire Williams found distinctive gendered patterns of friendship amongst the mining village members (Williams, 1981). Reskin and Roos suggest that a central mechanism for maintaining gender based inequity is 'social practices that create or exaggerate the social distance between status groups' (Reskin & Roos, 1987). Shaw and Mundy use their work on women miners' activism to challenge an

¹ This is a pseudonym, as are the names of the women used in this paper.

overly romantic and simplistic idea of the role of women in strikes. They argue that women are not always encouraged to take an activist role in unions and that these women were not likely to be motivated by feminism (Shaw & Mundy, 2005).

The methodology used, for this sub-study of a larger project called *Women Miners and Miners' Women*, was to go into Queensland mining towns to collect 113 interviews and secondary source material from archives and libraries. This paper is a small part of the study, when we went to Deansville in late March 2007. Whilst in Deansville we interviewed 11 females and 5 males. Our future aim is to compare this older snapshot of female activism with more recent industrial related activism

2 DISCUSSION

2.1 DEANSVILLE STAY DOWN STRIKE - 1952

The Deansville stay-down strike on May Day 1952 involved 122 men and went for a (then) record-breaking ten days. (Clark, 2006; Thomas, 1986) A stay down strike is when miners conduct a protest by striking and staying underground in the mine.

The dispute occurred in the context of living and working conditions, isolation and radical thinking. Health and safety conditions for the men working in the mine were difficult. Irene Seizer and her husband, Ken Seizer, describe the conditions that the husband experienced in the mines at this time:

He would come home a few times and his eyes were like meat from the gas. In those days they wore that little lamp on their head... Normally they would just bathe them or go to the hospital and get drops or something.

And if it is a gas as strong as that it hit you, you didn't walk away you fell away – it was zing! and your eyesight is gone.

Accidents in this 1950s mining community were all too frequent; leaving older women to comment on the large number of widows in Deansville. This referred not just to the direct and instant mine deaths but also to the lingering illnesses and painful sicknesses associated with coal-removal-related diseases. Deansville was a uniquely radical town: for its politics it pejoratively earned the name of 'little Russia'.

Unpaid wages and demarcation differences were the central issue in 1952. The dispute started after a resisted demarcation dispute ended with management ordering miners out of the pit. Management then refused to pay the men for any of the time they had worked during the dispute. Another underlying cause of distress was poor working conditions; the men had to bathe in a tin shed in which five or six men shared one shower nozzle. The road access on the Deansville-Cowne road was poor; it could take from two hours to two days for them to travel. Their water supply was dirty, inadequate and expensive, and their housing (if they had a house and not a tent) was appalling. Stretching miners' anger to breaking point, management issued an ultimatum that unless the miners continued to produce the maximum daily amount, they would close the mine. The miners responded that they would produce 12 skips per man until their claims were met. So at the Easter branch union meeting the miners moved for a stay down strike. The miners knew a stay-down-strike strategy would focus the public, the state and the company's attention upon their problems (Clark, 2006; Thomas, 1986).

Management responded by ordering the men out of the mine on threat of instant dismissal. When the men refused they were sacked. Management then turned off the fans and the power. The men lodged themselves in underground No. 2 Tunnel which was half a mile from the tunnel mouth and at a depth of 400 ft. An anonymous miner described the experience:

The men are living like cave dwellers and sleep in hard beds made of timber props, Hessian, even corrugated iron, to get away from the water seepage. Their feet are never dry. Almost all have colds...May have not seen daylight since last Thursday, even their one picket was he lad at night. (Thomas, 1986)

2.2 WOMEN ABOVE GROUND

Central to the unfolding of the strike was the role of the miners' women: wives, mothers and daughters. It was difficult to save with large families and only the most frugal were able to create a family strike fund for these strike periods. Above ground, they became service providers to their men, sole parents to their children and organizers of a second line of resistance.

Striking meant hardship for people without pay and with few savings and often large families. One of the more parsimonious women, Kathie Quinn said:

There were so many strikes you know. But ...their wages weren't that good for a long time and they had to go on strike... from my mother I learned, that you had to have a strike fund. You took so much out of your pay every fortnight and that was put aside to see you though the strike but because lots of people in the mine might not have done that and so they would have to ask the union for support for food and stuff. But I was brought up that you had a strike fund of your own to fall back on and so I never had to go and take I used to say "Give mine to someone who has a big family that needs it because I can support myself, I can support my family myself". [I set aside] about a pound and if I didn't have a pound I had ten schillings which just went aside.

Because of their poverty the provision of food was a priority and the collective organization for it was done by the Union of Australian Women (UAW) and the mining women's auxiliary: two overlapping groups. The women's auxiliary was focused on community needs such as creating a 'child minding centre, milk for school children, a swimming pool, kindergarten, a full time local dentist, books for the school library... as well as the efforts around fruit and vegetables and the continuing protests against high and ever rising prices' (Thomas, 1986).

Betty Zebel described the early days of the auxiliary and the way it was perceived:

We had a large group for a small town, of women and it really – a lot of women were frightened of it. It was supposed to be, that we were all communists! In those days, anybody who even thought differently was tagged with that – whether they were or whether they weren't or even understood what the word meant, you were tagged with that. When they stayed out on strike that is when the women really came together and were organized into it. They were organized as a group of women for meals and kids, when there was only the women left in town, when the men were down below.

When the stay-down strike was on, the auxiliary swung into action, as Gladys Nolan:

Well there was a little shop at the front of Mrs Nesbit's house too...So you would go up there and you would get a week's fruit and vegies to take home.

Peggy Issacs told of how, like many other women, her:

mum would make up meals in the weekend and take them over to the mine

Kathie Quinn explained what happened after that:

then someone would come up and get all the food. It would all be left at the entrance and they would take it down in a skip, they put it all in a skip and it would go down to them. I reckon that was a wonderful thing, like it was a good fight on the men's part to stay down there all that time all that time in the dark and that is fighting for conditions.

The women's auxiliary had organized three meals per day for the stay-down-strikers but it was reduced to two meals because the men said their enforced lack of exercise made three meals unnecessary.

Women also kept the men dry with a supply of warm clothing, cards and papers which they sent down to the mine at night which was when they kept track of their needs. As Gladys Nolan said:

They would send up little bits of paper that they would write on saying "Send down some smokes"...they would send tobacco down there not smokes...[They'd] come up at night time to the surface and that's when they would have it.

Irene Seizer spoke of the importance of the union and the Women's auxiliary:

The union men used to come around and see if we were all right, and if we had enough food and to see if there was anything that they could do to help. We were pretty good, because neighbors always helped you out, but it was a terrible time at that time because I wasn't used to that life. But everyone was so good. They all worked together. And all the women at that time, they weren't getting the food through, so they formed an organization ... and they used to get the fruit in the boxes and sell it ... at cost price to the people to ... help them out. To make sure that the children got plenty of fruit and vegetables... They all worked hard in helping the town and helping one another...I was busy with the three kids but I used to go to their meetings just to hear what was going on more or less.

Women articulated their enthusiastic commitment and support for the fight in this way:

Well the big 'stay-down' strike of the state mine was ...a good fight ... because those men stayed there. I think it was nine days in the dark and everyone brought food over...That was a wonderful thing, like it was a good fight on the men's part to stay down there all that time all that time in the dark and that is fighting for conditions (Kathie Quinn).

Although there was a common conception that the women's auxiliary 'only operated when we were on strike, you know the big one I keep harping back to, when we had to dish out food' (Nessie Calder). Their actions were wider than that and focused on community needs such as creating a 'childminding centre, milk for school children, a swimming pool, kindergarten, a full time local dentist, books for the school library... as well as the efforts around fruit and vegetables and the continuing protests against high and ever rising prices' (Thomas, 1986). As Ken Seizer and Irene Seizer told us:

They always helped one another and made sure that there was somebody there.

Like if you got sick there was always somebody who would come in and see if they could help out.

The UAW took on a broader and more educative function than the community driven women's auxiliaries; they were there in the most practical ways for the women in the striking communities. According to two founding members, Barbara Curthoys and Audrey McDonald, the UAW was set up in August 1950. Their disparate membership included Labour Party supporters, communists, members of the New Housewives' Association and Christian activists. Their goals included equity for women and children, a halt to nuclear testing and mining, equal distribution of wealth, increased welfare services, equal pay for women, disarmament, equality for Indigenous Australians, opposition to the White Australia Policy and abortion law reform (Curthoys & McDonald, 1996).

When a Deansville woman was asked about her UAW connections she said that their Deansville branch had been helped to get started by women from the Ipswich UAW:

Yes and they came out here and it became all around the Union of Australia Women, the UAW. I had my card for so many years (Kathie Quinn).

When Betty Zeibel was asked about the role of the UAW, particularly in relation to the stay-down strikes, she said:

The Brisbane UAW ... they supplied the money but they went to the markets and they bought fruit and vegetables and they went wherever ... you go to buy groceries. They spent the money in Brisbane which is just a fraction of the prices that you pay in towns here and the railways got it up straight away, we had support from the railway unions then. And they made sure that our orders came straight through. ... We sat down and sweated over what to give everybody we only had this much money and we were trying to stretch it this much. When we wanted money we just told the men what we wanted, they handled all of the business part of it.

Men handled the business side and the lifter comes with a security-guard function:

... you went down with your cardboard carton and they were broken into groups. There was always a man with a couple of women, he could be the lifter and depending on what Brisbane had spent the money on. ... We just did up the orders and you had the man there. If there was all this fighting, that she wanted or needed more soap powder because she liked to wash everyday...The men said "That was your order. If there is anything there you don't want take it out but there is nothing more going in" so ... everybody got theirs. There were several of the men that were pretty good butchers...We got help from the meat workers too... It wasn't a great deal but nobody ever went hungry and it ...worked like clockwork.

Apart from organizing food, for the striking miners and the families, the women supported the miners by actively demonstrating in union organized marches over, for example, cutting off the air to the miners from the in mine fans:

I can remember they were going to turn the fans off on them. They were going to turn the fans off and they would have no air see. So we all marched...they brought kids from Cowne and everything up here. There was no disturbance. We just marched from the Bowling club down there, straight across ... over to the state mine and demanded that they be put on ... They couldn't do anything else, there were so many people that went over there... We all went over there and they didn't turn it off. They had the Police over from Cowne because they knew it was going to happen but they didn't turn it off (Kathie Quinn).

She described her own risky involvement in the march:

I remember we were marching over from the Bowling Club to over at the mine with the 'stay-down' strike, and my mother in law was up here from Rocky because she has never had anything to do with mining. And they said "You have all got to march," and Steve said "You have got to come with me, Kathie Quinn, because I am the secretary of the Scottsville branch, so you have got to be in the march as well." And I said "Righto!" And his mother said to me, "You can't go! There might be a big scuffle and you are too tiny". And I said "I am all right". And you know those white envelope bags we used to have? I said "I will be all right, because I have got a shifting spanner in my bag." And she said "oh no! Murder!" I said "no one will touch me". It was the joke of the town for years.

(And was there a scuffle?)

No, they let us go.

Other sources write that the fans and the power were turned off by management who did not realize that there was natural ventilation and that "actually if the fans had been turned on we would have been frozen to death" (Thomas, 1986).

Women joined in deputations to the mine manager. At the end of one march, the community assembled at the pit head and a brass band played a concert directed at to the miners below.

Betty Zeibel identified this as still being a time when women were put aside in real decision making terms:

It was really good for the town because the women came together...but women were still in the days of being shunted aside. You know 'go home and look after the kids' type of thing and the women had to take over everything at home and ... the kids and everything else, and yet, they went to the mine with food. It brought the team together.

She spoke of how, although women were not part of the decision making, they at least knew what was happening.

If there was anything going on in dispute between management and workers and there was a lot in those days and there used to be a union meeting for men but part of the hall was set aside for the women. We weren't allowed to speak, we weren't allowed to vote but you could listen and you would know for yourself. Not your husband's view of it, listen for yourself. We were treated as people with brain enough to know and, which was very good really we were lucky really a lot of women weren't treated as people with brains... You knew all about it because you had sat in on all of the meetings on your side of the hall. Sometimes it was very hard, it was hard. But because it was just a one-industry town they held together, it held the women together.

While women and men on the surface protested, others went away to address meetings throughout North Queensland to get support for the strike. They spoke to enthusiastic waterside workers, meat workers, seamen, railway men and southern miners who made welcome pledges of support. There was also support from business people in the town.

These women do not seem to have been overly influenced by feminism but rather directed by class struggle where they fought side-by-side with their men, for their men, for their families and last for themselves. Male law was the law of the land.

2.3 OUTCOMES OF THE STRIKE

At a Coal Reference Board Hearing, on May 10 1952, the board said that ventilation and light would be restored if the men would come up within 24 hours. The son of the mine manager turned on the electricity, and on that tenth day, the stay-down strike men emerged from the two tunnels and marched to a meeting on the football field (Thomas, 1986).

The strike with the 120 men for 10 days down the mine was then an Australian record. The miners got their new bathroom in 1953 but what did women get? For them it had been a good clean class struggle, well fought and satisfying in that the demands of the men were eventually met and the solidarity of the town was palpable.

It was a really, really close community people truly looked after each other. There was one man that had a sick child and the man just, they just called it a 'Strike Levy' they would just say a 'Strike Levy' themselves so much and they levy themselves so much for this and they would just hand it over to who ever needed it. Like if you had a sick child that needed to go to Brisbane they would strike a levy enough to take you and your husband and the child, to Brisbane to specialist treatment. They don't do that stuff any more they looked after each other well, really well. The world was never any different there were women who's husband's drank all the pay. Well if they had kids they would strike a levy for her to pay the bills. It really was a well it was a good community to live in (Betty Zebel).

But had it positively changed male and female relations? No. And this did not worry Kathie Quinn:

You just knew when they were on strike you had to be there. I was born into coal mining. I lived in a coal mine area since I was a kid. In coal mine areas ... you stick by what your father does and what his rules are and what you should think and everything...In the days when I was young the men were the strongest. You know they said something they stuck to it but today it is like you do what the boss wants you to do. Wherein my day when I was younger and even when I was a kid the boss wasn't the boss.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Class, with its related concern for conditions at work rather than feminist concerns for gender equity, seems to dominate this early period of female activism. Class in mining villages is very clear cut. Mines are run by bosses as industrial armies with workers labour; and in the 1950s women were the reserve army that provided the free labour for the bosses via their domestic role. As one of our respondents indicated, this was a time when, in many respects, women were 'shunted aside' in real decision making terms and sent back home to look after the kids and the home. The stay-down strike brought 'the team together' but it did not fundamentally challenge the gendered roles of male and female workers lives around the coal mine. And yet women were actively part of the campaign, informed and engaged autonomous participants, not just following orders given by their men.

We have asked here whether these mining women, throughout their activism, were expected to take a central role with men in the political struggle or rather just a traditional role ministering to men's and children's needs. The answer must be that they did both. These women were seeped in class struggle. In Deansville in particular this was articulated as sophisticated political analysis. The women here knew about power and who did and did not have it and largely why this was the case. They joined politically savvy institutions like the UAW and they also took a central leading role in

the community if not (by necessity) at the workplace. And they certainly excelled in the sphere of ministering to the needs of men and children. But it was male decision making where it counted and while women were extensively consulted they still experienced the feeling of being shunted out.

This study is just the first episode in a series we are looking at examining the multiple roles of women in mining towns. Without anticipating the results of other research, it is fair to say that the depiction above had changed by the time of more recent disputes, where women not only gave support to their husbands and partners during the struggle but went on to devise their own ways of uniting the community and initiating their own protest actions. That, however, is a story for another day.

The key thing is that the women's response to the suffering and adversity that characterised life for these coal mining communities was to fight back in similar and different ways that were largely curtailed by the norms of their time on the role of women. How effective were they? These women "got what we wanted" (Mary Tooth) by difficult and demanding political actions and they stood united against a common enemy.

4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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