

# **‘You have us riled up!’: Women’s role in a 2001 miners’ strike**

**David Peetz & Georgina Murray**  
Griffith University

In April 2001, in the small Queensland town of Coaltown, a group of women found themselves standing on the road, jeering and cheering at cars passing by in the 4am cold on the way to the mine, as their husbands fought a bitter battle with the company around the issue of twelve hour shifts and the massive introduction of contract labour. This paper examines this dispute and argues that the women associated with this dispute mine actively and independently fought back against the mine management around these industrial issues that keenly affected their lives. They used their organisations to support their men but also to create a genuine female response to the industrial disputes. Our multi-media story is illustrated with a short film.

## **Introduction**

For over a century, most coal mining was done underground, where the dark is all pervasive and day is indistinguishable from night. Nowadays, the majority of coal mining, especially in Queensland, is open cut. Yet still the mines are dark places to work, because now they operate on twelve hour shifts, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and half of almost every open cut miner’s working hours are spent working in the dark of night.

The dark became the site for a key struggle involving mining women. In April 2001, in the small Queensland town we call ‘Coaltown’, a group of women found themselves standing on the road, jeering and cheering at cars passing by in the 4am cold on the way to the mine, as their husbands fought a bitter battle with the company, twelve hour shifts and the changes to working arrangements they wrought providing a dark backdrop to the dispute.

In this paper we look at the role of women in a dark mining dispute. We will see women’s roles as activists during their fathers’, brothers’ and husbands’ disputes. The question we ask is how involved were these women themselves? What is, and what was the nature of women’s response to living in a coal mining community and how did they fight back against the mine management around the industrial issues that so keenly affected their lives? How effective were the women’s groups such as the women’s auxiliary, Miners Support Group and/or the Union of Australian Women (UAW) in creating a genuine female response to industrial disputes? Were these women making meaningful decisions that helped create strategy in the fight back?

This small study is part of a larger project, ‘Women Miners and Miners’ Women’. We went into nine Queensland mining towns and collected 113 interviews and secondary source material from archives and libraries. This paper is one of the early outputs from the project, based on research in Coaltown in 2007, for which we interviewed 13 women and one man. It provides an interesting contrast with research we undertook into the role of women into a dispute in ‘Deansville’ half a century earlier (Murray & Peetz 2007). With Paul Davidson, a filmmaker from New Zealand, we have also made a film based on this Coaltown study, and will be showing this during our presentation.

## **The Issues**

Coaltown is a small inland town. Women no longer automatically stay at home to look after the children and tend to housework, though the sexual division of domestic labour still strongly exists. The miners of Coaltown work in open cut mines at South Mine and North Mine, both owned by Bigcoal. In 2001 the industry was in the midst of a transformation from

eight to twelve hour shift operations and was facing the prospect of the widespread use of contract labour. The Coaltown dispute, which involved other towns, was about how changes in working conditions could lead to the destruction of the mining communities.

For several years before the dispute began, insecurity at the Bigcoal mines, and in the communities, had been increasing. Several rounds of redundancies took place during the 1990s, with a major impact on the population of the town.

Beth Quick, (real names are not used) who was one of the founders of the Miner's Support Group at Coaltown, explained what had been happening toward the build-up of the dispute:

They had one lot – it was a voluntary redundancy, a 'golden handshake' I call it. But then they had another one, and then they had another one. They did three and they lost all their high up workers with all their knowledge, they really lost a lot. Then in the end the insecurity thing started happening. [The population of the town] went from 6000 down to 3000. The high school went from 600 down to 300 and down to 200 kids. Even in the schools you could see that the kids were insecure, because the parents were insecure (Beth Quick).

Across Bigcoal, the coal workforce was reduced by up to 40 per cent over three years. Negotiations over a new enterprise agreement (EA) dragged out.

The EA was supposed to be every two years and they were supposed to come to an agreement and this went for four years. That is what started it; it was [management] not agreeing to come to an agreement. ...Four years and the guys still weren't getting anywhere with an agreement (Beth Quick).

On Wednesday 21 February 2001, 400 miners from two mines voted unanimously to reject Bigcoals revised EB offer. On the following Friday, 23 February 2001, miners from five other sites including Coaltown gave notice of a seven day strike as protected action at the Bigcoal mines in the Bowen Basin.

The strike came after a series of frustrating meetings held over a revised Bigcoal enterprise agreement. After a long period of building pressure, the mineworkers across the four Bigcoal mines decided to take protected industrial action.

The company didn't want to give anything to the miners. They wanted to take away a lot. They wanted to get rid of labour and bring in contractors and do it as cheap as they could (Beth Quick).

Picket lines were quickly established by mineworkers at the North Mine and South Mine mines. While there was strong argument over the value of wage increases, the core issue was job security. The company insisted on increasing the use of contractors and casual labour. This was of special concern to the workers and their families in the context of redundancies and the insecurity this engendered. The mines continued to operate, with reduced capacity, using staff labour and contractors. As Ellen Brazier points out,

If you can bring a contractor in and put him on a lower wage – which was what all the talk was – of course you are going to undermine your permanent job. Everybody just wanted permanent jobs and security (Ellen Brazier).

It was an issue that galvanised the community. Job insecurity threatened not only the individuals in the town, but the continuing viability of the town itself, but for the wives and girlfriends, there were even more issues. They found it difficult to know what was going on:

The women were out at the mine and cooking and everything and helping – and still couldn't find out anything... The guys were out on strike and there was still all this

uncertainty going on, about what was happening. So the girls decided to call a meeting, because they were getting cranky with the guys, not knowing anything (Beth Quick,).

And they strongly objected to the company's use of security guards.

Really, what inflamed a lot of the women in the town I feel was that Bigcoal brought in *Security*. And *Security* wasn't just on the mine site. They infiltrated the town and they were walking around the streets, really intimidating women and children through out the town (Ellen Brazier).

### **Fightback**

The called meeting was huge. Four hundred Coaltown women turned up. That meeting decided to establish the Coaltown Women's Support Group. An executive were elected and they issued a statement of their aim:

not only to give support to our husbands and partners during their struggle with Bigcoal but more importantly to highlight the social impact Bigcoal's current direction of casualisation of its workforce is having on our communities...As mothers and wives, our concerns are not only for the continued prosperity of our communities but also for the future of our sons and daughters (Coaltown Miners Support Group, pamphlet, April 2001).

The statement set out clearly the longer term background as seen by the women of Coaltown:

This direction has seen the gradual decline of health and educational services, closure of small businesses, sporting facilities and the dislocation of families over the past five years in the mining towns of Coaltown, Coketown, Emerald and Blackwater where Bigcoal operate (Coaltown Miners Support Group, pamphlet, April 2001).

The women on the executive drove to Coketown, an hour to the north, to meet members of its Women's Auxiliary. Coaltown had once had a women's auxiliary, but it had closed down, whereas Coketown's auxiliary, had remained operative so women from Coaltown wanted to know how to run one. They were determined because:

... there comes a stage where you have had enough. As women we wanted answers and we weren't getting answers. So, yes, we were determined. We are going 'you have riled us up enough now; we want to see this through until you give us answers, until things are agreed upon, until we have got stability again!' (Beth Quick).

Financially, this dispute was not as hard for two income families as many wives were working. For others:

I know that there were some families that found it quite difficult. The union was giving them money to help them along. But it didn't really affect us. (Tania Nairn).

The women quickly established two picket lines – not at the mine sites (where the men's picket lines were located) but at the southern and northern exits from the town that led to the roads to the mines. As Faye Prince told us:

We used to go on both corners as you come into town of the morning. We would have the South Mine ladies up one end and the North Mine at the other end. And if we didn't have enough ladies we would all go and stand at the one corner (Faye Prince).



### **On the women's picket line**

*(source: The Karen Tarrant collection)*

The women's picket lines did more than just show support for the men:

The picket line was great for the women, because they needed to come to the picket line and talk about things and discuss things. Whereas when they went home, the guys were on twelve-hour shifts, they had their own questions that they couldn't deal with what was happening. So the women came to the picket line and they could answer questions and not harass the fellows when they came home from work. (Beth Quick).

And

one of the best things that happened on the picket line was the camaraderie-ship of the girls. We also got to learn things. Rather than the men being out at their picket line all day and coming home a little bit cranky, cross and frustrated and so forth – we were able to get out there and we were able to get the information to the girls. So when the girls went back home from the picket line and made their hubby's tea and whatever, they were able to communicate rather than yelling and screaming. That was very, very good and very strong. (Ellen Brazier).

The picket line was in place at the morning change of shift, initially five days a week, but later on alternate weekends as well. Hester Trent spoke of the enthusiasm the women brought to their picket lines.

It started off quiet. And then later it got noisier and noisier and annoying everyone. Yes and marching, and we were singing and dancing while we were waiting for the cars to come. And then [we'd call out] "yah!" And we were all excited to show our placards! (Hester Trent).

The picketers had brought out pots and kettles to bang together as the staff cars drove out to the mines. But this earbashing was not to last.

We were getting too rowdy! What we call Snob Hill, where the staff are, they actually called the Police and complained about the noise. And the police came and stopped us... We were told by the police that we weren't allowed to do anything. To keep it passive. So we did, we complied with the police (Beth Quick).

The picketers had to apply for permits to keep on demonstrating, and renew the permits every fortnight. A white line was drawn on the roadside, which the picketers could not cross. A set of rules were drawn up by the women to ensure they complied with the police requirements. These included: 'no closer than one metre from white line, remain on grassed area', 'no swearing' and 'no fingers after all we are LADIES'. According to Edith Shaw, despite forcing the women to quieten, the police were 'really good'.

They would come out to the men's picket line and they said, as long as there was no trouble, they had no hassles about it. They had to draw a white line along the road and they said "we don't want you crossing that line". Everybody went by that (Edith Shaw).

However, relations with the police had their moments. One of the more farcical concerned 'that bloody great big green tent', as Helen Callan put it:

It belonged to the town, it was a community thing. First in, best dressed; it was the miners who just happened to book it. So it was out at North Mine and there was camp beds and cooking. My son was out there one day cooking and they had these old cookers – so he did the corn beef and spuds that sort of thing. [My husband] Terry wrote some letters on behalf of the union to the paper... Yes so this poor bloody tent got confiscated and put in jail by the cops (Helen Callan).

Yet others reported tense moments involving police, described by Faye Prince:

The morning the Police chased us we just hopped in cars. One lot went to North Mine. My husband was at South Mine so we just went to South Mine. Of course the first thing we did is that we found our husbands. So we stood beside our husbands and [they said] "What are you doing here? You are supposed to be home getting the kids ready for school!" I would leave my kids in bed and we would go to the line. Then we would go home and by seven o' clock they would be ready to go to school. So here we are, out there and, well, that just stirred the men up even more that we got chased (Faye Prince).

The picket line was not without its dangers, as Ellen Brazier told us:

We had a few cars that would swerve towards us and come across the white line, where we were standing. And so we had to be a little bit careful, because there were people out there that were fair dinkum, wanted to give us a good scare.

But much scarier for the women were the security guards, brought in by the company from the south 'to assist with issues relating to safety and security of assets belonging to both Bigcoal and their staff' (Staff Memo, April, 2001) (from Ellen Brazier).



**'Security' with cameras**

*(source: The Karen Tarrant collection)*

It was very disturbing, as Beth Quick explained

we weren't used to that. We were a nice little community, where we never locked anything and where the kids were able to walk any where. And all of a sudden you

had these huge guys in here, looking over you and taking photos and it was intimidating (Beth Quick).

The women's picket line had a good collection of placards directed at the company –with slogans like 'Bigcoal profits before families', 'Bigcoal community wreckers' and 'stop destroying communities'. Several made play of Bigcoal's initials.

Beth Quick said one picketer, in particular, was the source of some entertainment:

We had celebrity visitors. We had a special visit from 'Whoopi Goldberg', with her lovely gorgeous smile and unruly locks. And we did have official visits. We had Barry Gomersall, the 'grasshopper' (Gomersall was famous for refereeing many State of Origin rugby league matches (Beth Quick).



**Whoopi Goldberg entertains the troops**

*(source: The Karen Tarrant collection)*

Helen Callan taught the picket line how to line dance. And it was something of a family affair. Hester Trent told us:

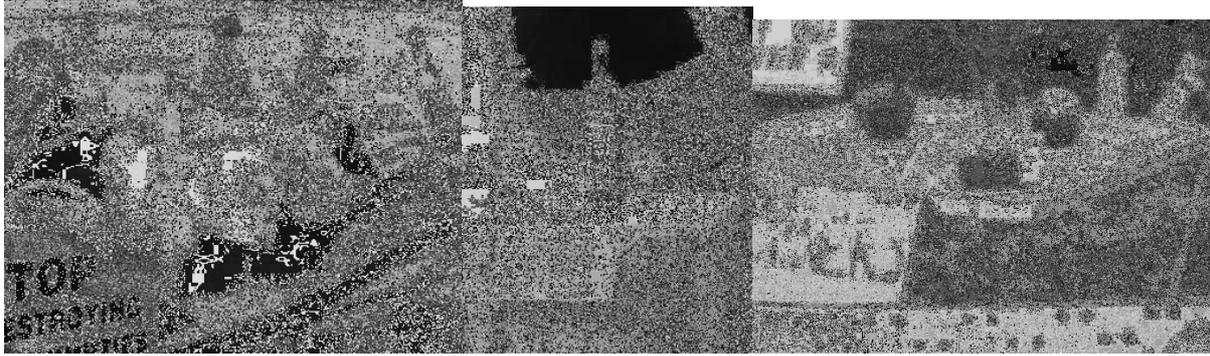
I had two girls and they came with me to the picket line. They would hold onto the placard. And they were happy. [They'd say] "Mummy can we come with you?" "Yes of course" (Hester Trent).

On another day, the ladies had morning tea at 'Snob Hill', the elevated street where the high ranking staff and their wives lived. As Karen Tarrant explained:

we decided that all the ladies would have morning tea up at Long Crescent – all these big homes where the staff live. We all took our table and our chairs and we all had our teacups and we sat back under the shade of a tree having our morning tea. We had our banners; we had them stuck in the ground (Karen Tarrant).

As Helen Trent saw it:

They were just looking and then they went into their houses. "What is going on?" Of course their husbands were at work, and they would be thinking "what is going on there?" And then they would have seen us with our placards under the tree having our tea and they would have been thinking "that is the protestors." (Helen Trent).



**Part of a rowdy picnic at 'Snob Hill', with special tables for staff and miners' meals**

*(source: The Karen Tarrant collection)*

A similar event held in Coketown to coincide with a staff 'ladies lunch' held by the wife of the regional manager even attracted an unflattering cartoon in the regional newspaper.

### **Husbands' Responses**

Some husbands did not appreciate the support their wives were giving. Karen Tarrant told us that there were:

men that wouldn't even allow their wives to go... There were a couple of ladies that I knew that wouldn't come down because their husbands were just [saying] "you are not going down there!" (Helen Trent).

It was not entirely clear why some men reacted like this, though Faye Prince pointed out that in one case it was because 'he was getting a bit of a back slap from some of the blokes at work about "Oh well, stand up for your rights! Your wife is out there doing it (Faye Prince)

But most husbands took a very positive view. As Helen Trent put it:

Our husbands would be proud of us because we were supporting them and we were one with them. We were united with them. I still remember when on my husband's car they painted... 'Workers that are united will never be defeated', and that was good (Helen Trent).

Therese Sale discussed how:

To be in the picket line I feel that I am counted...I am proud that I am doing something that I think is a good thing to do – especially when your husband works in the mine and you don't agree with what is happening. And I think that it helps to give them a bit of moral [support]. So they are very proud of us and they don't care if we don't do any cleaning in the house! (Therese Sale).

### **Management Response**

If the majority of the men liked what the ladies were doing, management did not. As Faye Prince saw it:

They hated us. The ladies got through to them more than the men did (Faye Prince, 2007).

Edith Shaw explained it as being because women were stepping out of their traditional role:

The company didn't like it that they were out there picketing. They thought it was just a male thing. When they saw the women out there they didn't like it at all (Edith Shaw).

Ellen Brazier, too, saw the importance of this non-traditional behaviour:

I think us women being involved in the picket line really put Bigcoal on notice. They didn't expect it. And they didn't like it. And they didn't know how to deal with it. They could deal with the men but they really didn't know how to deal with us at all (Ellen Brazier).

Staff wives had trouble coping with the women's resistance as well. Karen Tarrant spoke of one of the staff wives when

She lost it, she really lost it. And we had not said a word; all we were doing was holding our banners just standing there. And that didn't go unnoticed (Karen Tarrant).

The company was no longer dealing with a problem with its workforce – it was dealing with a problem with a community. As Helen Callan put it, the dispute:

brought the community so much closer, and I think that is what the companies eventually realised in the end. Because it was a no-win situation, because we all stuck together during the whole thing. But, yes, I would do it again all again tomorrow (Helen Callan).

### **Settlement and the wash up**

Eventually, after seven weeks of picketing, the dispute was settled and an EBA was signed. Both sides gave ground. The company conceded on job security for the existing workforce, but it was still able to maintain, and expand, its use of contractors. The mineworkers all still had permanent jobs to go back to, and the community was, in one sense, 'saved', though the continuing use of twelve hour shifts and contractors would continue to eat away at the town's fabric. As Edith Shaw put it:

they weren't happy going onto twelve-hour shifts, but we all had jobs, so that was the main thing. We all had our jobs...Everybody wanted a permanent job and nobody ended up being laid off which was something good (Edith Shaw).

It was a very different environment to that in the past when the union had been able to make major gains, and has continued to be so, as Bindi East lamented:

We fought for the conditions in the first fifteen years. It is quite sad to see them slowly dwindling away, because of the pressure that is being put on. And with these new IR laws, God knows what is going to happen! (Bindi East).

During the dispute there had been deep divisions created in the community between, on the one hand, the strikers and their supporters and, on the other hand, management, staff and staff wives. Personal relationships were strained. Several of the strikers wrote poems during the dispute, some of them directed against Bigcoal management, some highlighting the solidarity of the union, but several of them focused on the strains in friendships (eg Anon 2001):

The fellow that moved in across the road from me, he was quite devastated when I wouldn't talk to him. You know, I kept on talking to his girlfriend sort of thing and it never had anything to do with the wives. But because I had a good friend – and she is still is one of my good friends – and everyone hated her husband, that put us in a quandary because we had Terry's sixtieth birthday coming up and it was like "Well, if he is coming we are not coming"... I had to sacrifice my best mate and her husband (Helen Callan).

Edith Shaw added:

Men get over things a lot quicker than women do. And I think the wives of the staff probably took it a lot harder than what the men did. It was fine after a while

everything went back to – it took a while, but everything did go, sort of went back to normal, as much as it could (Edith Shaw).

The Coaltown Miners Support Group continues to exist, with a small active membership. Faye Prince contrasted the Coaltown Women's Support Group with some other, more temporary auxiliaries:

I think a lot of them sort of just died down, until another strike sort of pokes it nose about. Whereas the Coaltown one has been there. What we decided when we did it was that it was there as a community thing, to support the community as well. At the moment they are in the process of putting a clock in the main thoroughfare, they have bought lockers for the high school they have bought fridges for the primary school. They weren't just there for the strike, they were there for the community, for community help. Some people had their house burn down and they bought them a package of incidentals (Faye Prince).

In the meantime the company has felt forced to rebuild the links with the community that it shattered during this dispute. Even the local police station bears the evidence of corporate largesse in the form of a sponsored sign. But, as we shall see, no amount of sponsorship can hide the deleterious impact that shift arrangements and employment practices are having on communities like Coaltown. Beth Quick put it this way:

We still had the death of a community, I suppose you could say. We went from six thousand to two thousand people in a community. So obviously the families didn't come back again. Maybe it is up to three thousand now, but you still haven't got the families back in like you used to. It has changed and with a bit of luck history repeats, as they say, and maybe we will go back to that, but I don't think so it has changed too much (Beth Quick, 2007)).

## Conclusions

We asked whether these mining women, throughout their activism, are 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 (Thönnessen 1973). Women in the 2001 Coaltown strike not only gave support to their husbands and partners during the struggle with Bigcoal but they then went on to devise their own ways of uniting the community and initiating their own protest actions. Their women pickets were bonding experiences because it gave them the opportunity to assess and strategise about their situation.

The women's response to the suffering and adversity that characterised life for these coal mining communities was to fight back; they were not passive recipients of life. How effective were they? As one of these women articulated we "got what we wanted" by difficult and demanding political actions by standing shoulder to shoulder, united with their men, against a common threat.

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