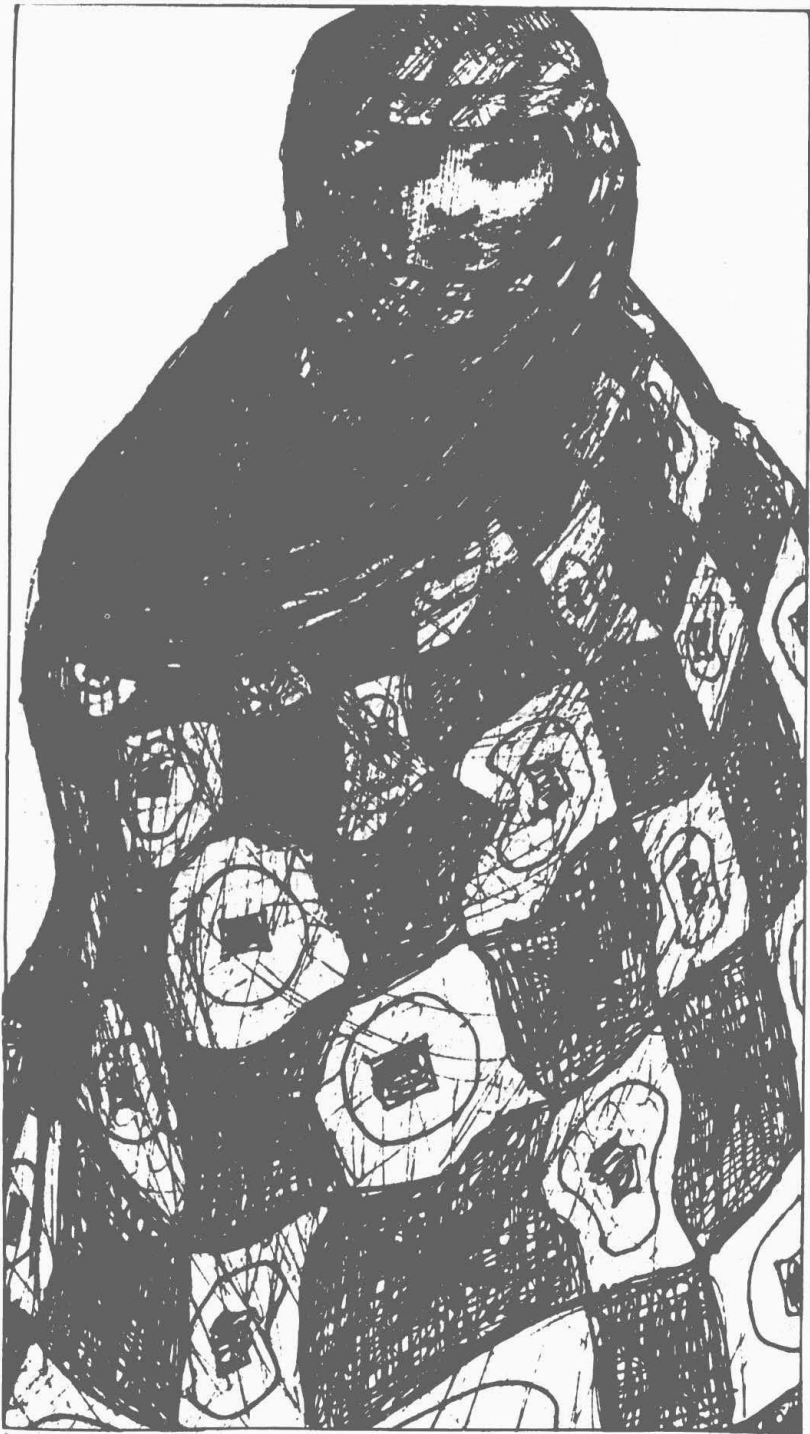


DIANE MENGHETTI

NORTH QUEENSLAND WOMEN AND THE
POPULAR FRONT OF 1935-40

In July 1935 the Seventh Comintern Congress, meeting in Moscow, announced that from that date all Communist Party activities were to be subordinated to the fight against international fascism. The new policy—the Popular Front—aimed at securing alliances with other anti-fascist groups and at broadening the base of the Party itself, to facilitate an attack on the growing power of the fascist regimes. Member parties were therefore urged to initiate recruiting campaigns aimed at hitherto neglected groups including “intellectuals”, small businessmen, working farmers and women. In North Queensland the policy was implemented with significant success, leading eventually to victories in municipal elections in Townsville and Collinsville in 1939 and 1942, and to the election of Australia’s first communist M.L.A. to the state seat of Bowen in 1944. Contributing to the success was a remarkably strong and independent women’s movement which grew up in the region during the late 1930’s and early 1940’s.

Although feminist writings had featured in communist journals since the foundation of the Party, independent action by women’s groups had generally been discouraged for both theoretical and organisational reasons. Theoretically, Marxists believed that no true liberation of women could be achieved independently of class liberation. Organisationally, the system of democratic centralism kept policy decisions within the province of the Central Committees. Women’s organisations existed to implement these decisions. These factors were reinforced in Australia by prevailing ideas of women’s role in society and by the Party’s close alliance with the trade union movement.¹ The success of the women’s groups in North Queensland is therefore something of a paradox since neither local Party members nor the northern community in general were more liberal in their attitudes towards women than other Australians. Indeed, the New Zealand novelist and feminist Jean Devanny, who visited



the north during 1935 and 1936, reported that the district was extremely “backward” in this respect, and she described local communists as “scarcely less chauvinistic than the rest of the population”.² In the light of such statements the achievements of anti-fascist women in North Queensland during the late 1930’s merit examination.

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As the Popular Front was being enunciated in Moscow, the North Queensland sugar mill areas of Mourilyan, South Johnstone, Goondi and Tully were locked into a bitter strike aimed at forcing the industrial court to order that sugar cane be burned prior to harvesting. Women first became active in the dispute during a meeting held at Innisfail to elect a committee to organise strike relief.³ Several women joined this committee, and since the relief kitchens were to be run by cane cutters’ gang cooks they devoted themselves to organising entertainments to alleviate the boredom of forced inactivity. Under the headline: “Workers display Initiative at Mourilyan”, the *Workers Weekly* listed their activities as including “. . . concerts, card parties, cricket, football, picnics, swimming, all forms of sport, debates, community singing, dancing, wheelbarrow races, etc.”⁴ Recognising a rare opportunity, they held dancing classes for the canecutters at the Mourilyan School of Arts. The lessons were put to use at evening socials which consisted of dancing, supper and a sing-song, for which the Communist Party provided song sheets. Devanny reported that *Avanti Popolo* (Forward the People) was a great favourite among the Italians, and that all enjoyed the Red Aviator’s Song, for which words and music had recently arrived from Melbourne.

It was among these women that the first North Queensland Women’s Progress Club (W.P.C.) was formed in Innisfail. The object of the group was primarily industrial – to organise the wives of the workers both to ensure their support for the current and future strikes, and to give practical assistance to the families of the men who were without an income. Meanwhile, in the other major strike relief centre, Tully, another W.P.C. was being

formed. It was in this town that the leader of the Communist Party in North Queensland, Jack Henry, had his headquarters, and during State elections held the previous May some twenty-three per cent of the townspeople had voted for the Party candidate.⁵ Most of Henry's support however came from the ranks of the sugar workers and small farmers of the district; his extreme shyness in the company of women⁶ had resulted in an almost total failure to attract female members. When the strike broke out at the beginning of August only one woman was enrolled in the Tully Section, and young tailoress Eileen Quinn felt so isolated when attending the overwhelmingly male meetings that she later confessed to a sensation of "immorality". Devanny's arrival, however, compensated for Henry's weakness in this area, and when the Tully W.P.C. held its inaugural meeting around Quinn's invalid bed five communists were among its twenty-five foundation members. Again the basic aim of the group was industrial, but the club also held socials and educational evenings which were funded by street stalls.

After the strike Devanny continued to tour the north on behalf of the Movement Against War and Fascism, a communist "front" group of which she was a prominent representative. By the end of 1935 she had founded Progress Clubs in Ayr, Home Hill and Townsville,⁷ although this last group quickly collapsed, possibly due to a lack of efficient leadership. In July 1936 Quinn removed to Townsville where she reconstituted the club and built it into the most effective front organisation of the period.

The constitution of the Townsville W.P.C. stated that the group was ". . . Non-Sectarian, Non-Party . . ." and that ". . . neither religion or (*sic*) politics shall be discussed at its meetings".⁸ Throughout its life the club continued to protest its non-political nature. Early in 1939 the current president, Ann Horne, told a meeting:

It was formed in July 1936 to organise women into an active and energetic body, which will work for the progressive improvement in the lot of women and children. We are not a purely charitable organisation, but will endeavour to relieve distress whenever possible, always realising that while this unfair system of society exists, distress will be created faster than organisation can relieve it. We are non-party and non-sectarian.

All are welcome, no matter what their political or other views are. All we ask is that our members are willing to work for the general improvement of the conditions of life of the women and children.⁹

Evidently, and perhaps not surprisingly, this statement was greeted with disbelief as she deliberately reiterated the club's political complexion at a subsequent meeting:

I wish to take the opportunity tonight of stating that the Women's Progress Club is not a Communist organisation as so often referred to by some people of this town. There are a few Communist members in the Club, but because these women are progressive and wish to join a progressive organisation that does not make this club a communist club. . . .¹⁰

Neither the membership nor the club's activities, however, vindicate her claim. More than half the members were communists, and most others were the wives or daughters of Party members.¹¹ Further, the activities of the group were often very political indeed.

When Melbourne communist Ralph Gibson visited Townsville on behalf of the International Peace Conference early in 1937 it was the Townsville W.P.C. which organised his meetings. The group held dances to raise money for the Chinese and Spanish Relief Fund Committees, two highly active "front" groups engaged, during the late thirties, in raising money to support the victims of the Japanese invasion of China and of the Nationalist revolution in Spain, both of which the Party considered manifestations of fascist expansionism. On May Day 1937 the Townsville club marched as a group, carrying peace slogans; they also marched in the processions of the next two years.¹² From 1937 the W.P.C. sent delegates to the annual District Conference of the Communist Party of Australia,¹³ and often the Party's current preoccupations were reflected in W.P.C. activities. When organised by the Progress Club however the issues tended to be slanted towards welfare concerns: when the Communist Party was waging its peace campaign of 1937, the W.P.C. was protesting that the war budget was impinging upon funds available for social services.

Work for Spain and China continued throughout 1938 but, as the files of the local Communist newspaper, the *North*

Queensland Guardian, demonstrate, the club was less active than in the previous year. As the original president was in Brisbane, the group may have had difficulty in adjusting to her absence. Two magazines were sponsored during 1938: *World Peace* and *Women Today*, and some of the fortnightly meetings were devoted to discussions of articles appearing in these journals. Despite the continued absence of the foundation president the club's activities once more became extremely political during the following year. In April 1939 the W.P.C. passed a resolution supporting the Waterside Workers' Federation in its attempt to end the export of war materials to "aggressor nations",¹⁴ and the following month it ran socials to help fund the communist candidate Fred Paterson's bid in a Townsville by election.¹⁵ On 24 May, three days before the poll, Townsville Mayoress, Margaret Gill, called a public meeting at the Town Hall to launch a campaign in support of a National Register of Women complementary to the Federal Government's measure for men. The National Register consisted of a census of all men between the ages of eighteen and sixty-four and was described by the Minister for Defence, G.A. Street, as a means of facilitating "... the allocation of the man power of the nation in a national emergency"¹⁶ Seen by its opponents as a step towards conscription, the Register was vigorously resisted by the Communist Party and other anti-war groups. Reports on the progress of Gill's meeting vary. The Women's Progress Club sent delegates to heckle, and the *North Queensland Guardian* reported that the election of office bearers had broken up in disorder.¹⁷ The *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, on the other hand, reported that a committee had been elected "in an orderly manner", and its first meeting arranged.¹⁸ However, the list of committee members published by the *Bulletin* contains the names of three communist women, and gives the venue of its first meeting as the Young Women's Christian Association hall. Since the secretary of the Y.W.C.A. at this time was a member of the Party, and her name appears on the list of National Register committee members, it may be assumed that Margaret Gill's patriotic gesture was thwarted, either during the initial meeting or by infiltration of the committee. The following week the Progress Club

called a meeting near a large fig tree outside the post office, known as the Tree of Knowledge, to explain its attitude to the National Register to the public.¹⁹

The Women's Progress Club was politically, then, a fairly typical "front". This view is reinforced by one member's comment that when the club was perceived to have outlived its usefulness, "we changed it into the Trades and Labour Council Women's Auxiliary".²⁰ Nevertheless its activities were by no means confined to the implementation of Party decisions. Political activities were interspersed with both social work and feminist propaganda. Money raised at the fortnightly dances and socials, and through the ubiquitous street stall, was used for charitable as well as political purposes. Needy families were helped whenever possible, and the club sponsored Christmas treats for the children of the unemployed.²¹ Donations made by the group to the Sister Kenny Memorial Fund led, some time later, to an acrimonious dispute with Tom Aikens,²² president of the fund. One Progress Club member, believing that Aikens had accounted inadequately for the money donated, had her query published in the women's column of the *North Queensland Guardian*. Aikens, in reply, somewhat irrelevantly denounced the columnist "Flo"²³ as a man. He was rewarded with a public lecture through the column on the Party's policy of sexual equality.²⁴ During 1939 the club celebrated International Women's Day,²⁵ and later held a minute's silence for the death of May Holman, M.L.A.²⁶

Probably the most successful work of the W.P.C. resulted from its members' lobbying for public utilities relevant to women and children in the district. Among their demands were a free library, relief work for unemployed boys, a children's hospital for Townsville, free milk for school children and a ladies' retiring room in the city.²⁷ A *Bulletin* report of a club meeting held on 1 June 1939 demonstrates the technique employed in pursuit of these aims. At this meeting the secretary read a letter from the Town Clerk, replying to the club's request for a retiring room. The letter announced that the Mayor would receive delegates from interested groups at the Town Hall. Two delegates were sent to the meeting, but found that no other group was repres-

ented. Nevertheless they succeeded in extracting a promise that a rest room would be included in the remodelling plan for the Market Buildings.²⁸

Communist women in Townsville worked hard to understand the theoretical basis of their Party. For many the study of political, economic and philosophical concepts was quite alien, and the classes held at the Communist Party rooms in Flinders Street, and the weekend seminars conducted at a house at Pallarenda and at the Scout Den in Flinders Street represented novel and often difficult experiences. Perhaps the most taxing problems arose from the attempt to apply these concepts to local conditions.²⁹ The W.P.C. members did this admirably; they included many of the traditional pursuits of northern women in the work of the club. They had, for example, a Hospital Committee, whose members were responsible for distributing flowers and books to public hospital patients, who were then interviewed on conditions at the hospital. During 1939 a horticultural and handicraft exhibition was held by the Progress Club at the Townsville Ambulance rooms.³⁰ This blending of traditional provincial Australian women's occupations with local, national and international politics demonstrates an effective application of the policy decisions of the 1935 Comintern Congress.³¹

The Women's Progress Clubs by no means embraced all the activities of communist women in North Queensland. At a more direct level the District (later Sub-State) women's committee (covering all areas north and west of Mackay) was led by Florence Milburn, who travelled extensively in the region organising women's groups.³² Milburn also worked through the women's column of the *North Queensland Guardian*, which was published in Townsville from May 1937 to May 1940. Under her editorship the column became a happy blend of domestic and political concerns. One issue,³³ chosen as a random example, featured an editorial written in defence of the Women's Progress Club, which had recently been accused of corrupting the women of Townsville, and three readers' letters. The first of these pleaded for equal opportunities for married female teachers; the second protested the price of shirts at the Babinda

store, accusing the storekeeper of "profiteering"; the third advised that children needed play to promote their mental and physical wellbeing; the remainder of the column was devoted to recipes. Often the activities of the Women's Committees were based on traditional "women's work". In fund raising drives members ran street stalls and provided suppers at dances and balls.³⁴ They were, however, also engaged in direct political action, both as Communist Party representatives at women's functions such as International Women's Day,³⁵ and as office bearers within the Party. Railway Estate Branch of the Communist Party had a woman president from 1937 to the end of the period under review, and members recall considerable numbers of women attending the District Conference as Branch delegates.³⁶

Both at Townsville and in other towns in North Queensland Party members worked within other women's organisations in the hope of spreading their message beyond their normal circle of acquaintance. This tactic was unusually successful in Collinsville where the Party secretary reported that every committee in the town had at least one communist member.³⁷ Certainly when the national leader J.B. Miles visited the mining town in 1936 representatives of the Ladies Home League and the Ladies Hospital Guild were among those who welcomed him at the railway station,³⁸ while the Collinsville Country Women's Association was represented at Communist Party conferences by Mary Miller.³⁹ However in Townsville these organisations shared only two members, and communist activities within the C.W.A. were limited to heckling meetings.⁴⁰ Collinsville's penetration of this Association was not equalled in Queensland until the war period when, in 1942, the Gladstone C.W.A. circulated a petition calling on the Federal Government to lift the ban on the Communist Party.⁴¹ Women were also very active in the peace movement, the Townsville Women's Peace Committee becoming an important "front" by 1938. The committee, which met at the Y.W.C.A. rooms and shared an office bearer with that association, pledged its support for Fred Paterson during the election campaign of 1939. A Belgian Gardens branch of the Peace Council was formed at the beginning of June that year and

shortly after affiliated with the International Peace Council. This group sent delegate Ellen Taylor to the National Women's Peace Conference in Brisbane in August.^{4 2}

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With so much activity it would be easy to overestimate the number of women involved. Cross membership between the organisations was high, and although definite numbers cannot be ascertained it is likely that no more than twenty women formed the core of the women's movement in Townsville. Their strength lay in their ability to attract large numbers of peripheral helpers who manned street stalls and baked cakes for a cause which became less alien as its adherents demonstrated their active concern for the immediate problems of women in the North Queensland community. The women's movement, in spite of, or perhaps because of, its parochialism, had an important place in the development of the Popular Front in the north. Furthermore, its contribution to the community in general should not be overlooked. The women's groups played an increasingly important role during the war period when their work concentrated on the welfare of troops stationed in the district. Membership grew rapidly during the early war years, peaking in 1943. Townsville women were among the founder members of the Union of Australian Women. The foundations for these developments were laid during the Popular Front years by a group of communist women whose paradoxical success was due to their being very much a part of the local community. They worked within the culture of the region to win the status which that culture traditionally denied them, and their importance reaches beyond the material and political benefits they won.

NOTES

- ¹ For a discussion of the effects of the Australian trade union movement on women see Edna Ryan & Anne Conlon, *Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work 1788-1974* (Sydney 1975).
- ² Jean Devanny, private papers in the possession of Pat Hurd, Townsville.
- ³ No relief was available from the sugar workers' union the A.W.U. because the strike had not been authorised by the union.
- ⁴ *Workers Weekly*, 3 September 1935.
- ⁵ Queensland. Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Papers* 1935.
- ⁶ Eileen Quinn, Townsville, interview, 2 April 1979.
- ⁷ *Workers Weekly*, 1 January 1936.
- ⁸ Rules and Constitution of the Women's Progress Club of Townsville, p. 1. This document is in the possession of Eileen Quinn, Townsville.
- ⁹ *North Queensland Guardian*, 17 March 1939.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16 June 1939.
- ¹¹ Eileen Quinn, interview, 16 April 1939.
- ¹² For details of these activities see *North Queensland Guardian*, 1 May 1937, 5 May 1939.
- ¹³ Eileen Quinn, informal communication, 20 May 1979.
- ¹⁴ *North Queensland Guardian*, 1 May 1937, 17 March 1939, 28 April 1939.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12 May 1939.
- ¹⁶ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 159.
- ¹⁷ *North Queensland Guardian*, 2 June 1939.
- ¹⁸ *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 1 June 1939.
- ¹⁹ *North Queensland Guardian*, 9 June 1939.

- ²⁰ Eileen Quinn, interview, 16 April 1979.
- ²¹ *North Queensland Guardian*, 23 February 1937, 17 March 1939.
- ²² Tom Aikens (born 1900). Alderman (A.L.P.) Cloncurry, 1924-1930; Townsville 1936-1942; Alderman (H.L.P.) Townsville 1943-1949; M.L.A. (Hermit Park Labor, N.Q.L.P., N.Q.P.) 1944-1977. Aikens was expelled from the A.L.P. in August 1940.
- ²³ Florence Milburn.
- ²⁴ *North Queensland Guardian*, 23 February 1939 to 8 March 1939.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 March 1939.
- ²⁶ May Holman, M.L.A. Forrest, W.A. When elected in 1925 Holman was the only woman member of an Australian parliament.
- ²⁷ *North Queensland Guardian*, 1 May 1937, 17 March 1939.
- ²⁸ *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 6 June 1939.
- ²⁹ Eileen Quinn, informal communication, 20 May 1979.
- ³⁰ *North Queensland Guardian*, 25 August 1939.
- ³¹ By 1939 W.P.C.s had been established in Innisfail, Cairns, Babinda, Ayr and Home Hill. Possibly some ideological confusion led to a *Ladies' Progress Club* being formed at Millaa Millaa.
- ³² *North Queensland Guardian*, 24 February 1939.
- ³³ 21 December 1939.
- ³⁴ *Workers Weekly*, 24 April 1936; *North Queensland Guardian*, 12 May 1939.
- ³⁵ *North Queensland Guardian*, 14 April 1939.
- ³⁶ Jim Henderson, formerly secretary of the Collinsville Branch of the C.P.A., Fairfield, Brisbane, informal communication, 20 July 1979.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ *Workers Weekly*, 10 July 1936.

³⁹ Jim Henderson, informal communication, 20 July 1979.

⁴⁰ Eileen Quinn, informal communication, 20 May 1979.

⁴¹ *The Tribune*, 2 December 1942. An illegal news sheet issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Sydney. In the possession of the Sydney branch of the C.P.A.

⁴² *North Queensland Guardian*, 20 October 1938, 26 May 1939, 2 June 1939, 30 June 1939, 6 October 1939.

RORY HARRIS

SHE CAME IN FROM THE TERMINAL

she came in from the terminal
walked into the railway cafe
slid a tray the entire distance
around the counter
stopped
bought a metallic pot filled with tea
carried it back
to a single dustless table
setting everything down
with fragile care
as if it would shatter of its own purpose
poured the liquid
into the white china cup
sipped at it carefully
then hunched forward
as if to drink with more ease
wrapped her hands cautiously
around the warm whiteness
as if it were a sparrow
having fallen from a height
beyond memory