Hidden Seeds:

A political economy of working class women in Campbelltown (NSW)

by

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of two working class sisters:

_Cindy Dewhurst (1972 - 1994) and Jan Wines (1936 – 2001)_

Their humanity, strength and solidarity are deeply missed.
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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Helen Masterman-Smith
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Synopsis

This thesis examines the political economy of working class women in contemporary Campbelltown (NSW). A broad political economic approach is employed that considers relevant social structures, their effects, and working class women’s responses to them. It includes investigation of material and non-material, subjective and objective, aspects of this dialectical relationship.

This study argues the political agency of Australian working class women has rarely been acknowledged, let alone understood. The thesis focuses on working class women in the suburbs and their politics of everyday life. Though these women rarely attract political investigation, they are too often assumed to be passive, apathetic, unenlightened or conservative bearers of oppression. These stereotypes persist despite the variability in historical portrayals of working class women, suggesting working class women’s politics only makes sense in the context of their conditions of existence in specific times and places.

The thesis makes a contribution towards the field of applied feminist political economy research. It employs a historical materialist approach to demystify working class women’s politics. The empirical heart of the project draws on in-depth interviews with local working class women about their experiences and views of family, community, politics, work, unemployment and social institutions. This qualitative material is set against a detailed local political economic analysis of contemporary Campbelltown. The interconnections of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production in which working class women labour, survive and resist are explored. The thesis questions what part capitalism and socialism play in their pursuit of self and social emancipation.

Understanding the political economy of working class women is fundamental to social and ecological health and sustainability. Questions of class power and conflict, and gendered distributions of work and poverty locate working class women at the core of these pressing concerns. The central hypothesis of this study is that working class women are engaged in a wealth of political strategies stemming from their everyday bid for survival. Their (often contradictory) collective and self-activity coalesces around a politics antithetical to the logic of capitalism because it depends on their exploitation and immiseration for its viability. Working class women practice and reproduce a politics of survival and hope that informs their hidden worlds of resistance.
1 Introduction

This thesis examines the political economy of working class women. It is based on a contextualised account of working class women in Campbelltown (NSW). A broad political economic approach is employed to analyse the connection between working class women and the distribution of power and wealth under Australian capitalism. This approach considers relevant political economic structures and their consequences, and the agency of working class women in their dealings with them. It includes investigation of material and non-material, subjective and objective, aspects of this dialectic.

Cohen states ‘we know much more about the evolving political and social lives of middle-class women than of their working-class counterparts.’\(^1\) This study focuses on working class women in the suburbs, women who rarely attract scholarly attention, but nonetheless are too often assumed to be passive, apathetic, unenlightened or conservative bearers of oppression.\(^2\) While no revolutionaries, in the conventional sense,

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were interviewed for this project it questions stereotypical assumptions of working class women as apolitical. Walkerdine and Lucey enquire:

> What fantasies ...exist of working-class women? Simultaneously as threat and desire? As promiscuous, exciting, harmful, diseased, poor mothers, yet salt of the earth, hard workers with grizzled faces and home cooking, with community spirit, warm, washerwomen with big arms, big breasts, big hearts.

This study asks whether the disparagement and avoidance of the politics of everyday life conducted by working class women is part of the ‘strategies of government’ to suppress and discredit capital’s structural adversaries.

A historical materialist approach assists in the demystification of working class women’s politics. The above typecast depictions exist despite the variability in historical portrayals of working class women, sometimes as militant stalwarts and at other times as conservative breaks on their husband’s radicalism. These differences suggest working class women’s politics only make sense in the context of their conditions of existence in specific times and places. A grounded perspective helps explain why some working class women participate in overt political actions and others do not and why some adopt a more or less radical critique of the world around them. It reveals the inherently contradictory social relationships in which they are embroiled. Moreover, it deepens our understanding of the resonance, or otherwise, of non-capitalist political economies in their lives.

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The thesis argues that although the political economy of working class women is indelibly affected by the capitalist mode of production, it is not their only means of existence. Their labour in the non-capitalist community and household is vital, yet these arenas are also imprinted with the vicissitudes of capital and the state. Ferguson states:

Struggle and strategy must be ...assessed within the specific contexts. ...if gender and class, etc., are not separate systems, so much as they are a series of layered experiences, it is essential to move away from framing analysis in terms of structures and functions and begin instead with the real social relations and the human agents that produce, shape and sustain those structures and functions.

This study examines the ways working class women survive and resist social forces seeking to limit and control them. It explores the interconnections of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production in which they labour, and questions what part capitalism and socialism play in their pursuit of self and social emancipation.

Understanding the political economy of working class women is a question fundamental to human and planetary survival. The excesses of capital seriously threaten the existence

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6 It is recognised ‘community’ is a contested concept. See for example: Anderson, B. 1983. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism. Verso, London; Bryson, L. and Wearing, B. 1985. "Australian Community Studies: A Feminist Critique." Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology, 21, 349-366. For the interviewees this notion (rather than ‘civil society’) was regularly employed as part of their ways of seeing and articulating their social environment, with all its conflicts and contradictions. The term is used in the thesis to describe the terrain the women occupied between the private home and the public institutionalised world of the market and the state, though the lines between them overlap and blur. In this study the community is understood as having spatial/geographic and/or associative dimensions. It primarily refers to the commons these women occupy and fight for, their neighbourhoods and their social networks, which may or may not be concentrated in a specific physical location. For the interviewees, community was a site of struggle where they battled ‘outside the home’ for resources, overtly and covertly. See: Peel, M. 1993. Making a Place: Women in the 'Workers' City'. Urban Research Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra; also Dominelli, L. 1990. Women and Community Action. Venture Press, Birmingham.

of the planet and humanity.\textsuperscript{8} Evidence of the environmental and social destruction of capital expansion is abundant.\textsuperscript{9} While profits are gained in ‘green’ industries, they are not sufficient to curtail the rampage of slash and burn capitalism.\textsuperscript{10} As the capital system relies on endless accumulation for survival, it will not regulate its own logic of growth or permit others to do so.\textsuperscript{11} The state is permissible only in forms that promote capital accumulation. Without a major transformation in the political economy it is difficult to see what might divert capital from its current path of destruction. In short, human and/or planetary devastation seems inevitable under the continuing rule of capital and, therefore, its preconditions must be replaced by a globally sustainable political economy.\textsuperscript{12} Capital accumulation is dependent on the appropriation of surplus labour which is only possible where alternative means of production and survival are removed and a hierarchical division of labour, that is, a class system is established.\textsuperscript{13}

If this mode of production continues, Meszaros argues it is a case of socialism or ‘barbarism if we are lucky’.\textsuperscript{14} If a successful path to a non-exploitative social system is not discovered and forged, the consequences will be far worse than the social suffering currently engulfing humanity. Generally and historically speaking, those advantaged by the class system will not undermine their immediate material privileges by contributing

\textsuperscript{10} Stilwell, 2000, 268-278.
\textsuperscript{12} Stilwell, 2003.
to its demise.\textsuperscript{15} Those most disadvantaged by the class system have the greatest interest in transforming it but the least resources for doing so.\textsuperscript{16} McCourt recognised this potential in her Chicago based study:

\begin{quote}
…with encouragement and the opportunity to do so, working-class women are willing and eager to enter into organizational life. Often when these women, with their bottled-up needs for expression, are let loose on an organization, they show an almost breathtaking eagerness for activity.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

The significance of working class women in the conflict between labour and capital has been intensified by the feminisation of poverty, the proletarianisation of women, and the growth of female-headed households.\textsuperscript{18}

In any conflict, particularly when the scales are so uneven, an understanding of the terrain of struggle is a first priority. In working class women’s fight against the oppression of capitalism and all other forms of domination “[t]he exploration of a humanistic political economic alternative is a key element in that process.”\textsuperscript{19} Charting and analysing the geography of capital and delineating the quagmires and vantage points working class women (amongst others) occupy, is a crucial task in the struggle to free humanity and the planet from capital’s grip. Singer points out “women represent half of humanity; it is impossible to put equality at the top of your platform and be dissociated from their struggle.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} McCourt, 1977, 25.
\textsuperscript{19} Stilwell, 2003, 23.
\textsuperscript{20} Singer, 1996.
Meszaros contends Marx’s argument in *Capital* involved ‘going beyond capital as such and not merely beyond capitalism.’ From this perspective, capitalism is but one mode of production based on the rule of capital. In Meszaros’ view the postcapitalist societies, that defined themselves as socialist political economies, were ‘in fact reproductions of capital in another form.’ Meszaros argues the vital element is the ‘hierarchical structural subordination of labour to the material imperatives of production oriented toward accumulation’, that is, the requirement for labour to produce a surplus beyond their self-defined needs for anybody or any structure, be it capitalist or state/’public’ ownership of the means of the production of capital. The analytical implication of this perspective is that political economy must map out any structure or force that seeks to install the hierarchical divisions of labour needed for the appropriation of capital.

A broader analysis of capital systems, that includes capitalism as only one strategy for the extraction of surplus labour, has particular relevance for feminists concerned with the emancipation of all women. The failure of nominally socialist societies, such as the Soviet Union, to deliver women’s emancipation dismayed many socialist feminists. The validity of such a conclusion rests on what definition of socialism is applied. Meszaros, among others, argues that the Soviet system was a far cry from socialism:

> …we can only speak about socialism when people are in control of their own activity and of the allocation of its fruits to their own ends. This means the self-activity and self control of society by the associated producers, as Marx put it. Naturally,
the ‘associated producers’ cannot control their activity and its objectives unless they also control the allocation of the socially produced surplus. It is therefore inconceivable to institute socialism if a separate body remains in control of the extraction and appropriation of surplus labor.²⁵

Following this understanding, it can be argued that socialism has never been sufficiently established to gauge its implications for the position of women; theories about what might be possible have never been tested. The rule of capital, in Stalinist or capitalist garb, is incapable of delivering women’s emancipation because social inequality is concomitant with the appropriation of surplus labour.

The inescapability of social inequality within capital systems underscores developments in the position of Australian women. The lives of Australian women today are markedly different to those of previous generations.²⁶ In general, women have greater access to a range of occupations, they are legally able to end unsatisfactory marriages, they have access to birth control, and they have the right to vote and stand for parliamentary elections. Improvements in the lives of some women have come at the expense of others. The polarisation of income distribution among Australian women continues.²⁷ Women of lower socio-economic status record lower educational, occupational and health statuses, with indigenous women experiencing acute social disadvantage.²⁸

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This legacy is not limited to the experiences of Australian women. Ruth Sidel published one of the first studies of working class women during the 1970s. Some twenty-five years later she reflected on their contemporary position in New York:

… the forms of the city’s inhumanity have changed … but working-class women today are faced with other forms of inhumanity: routinized, insecure jobs that pay salaries barely sufficient to feed and clothe a family; frequent periods of unemployment, particularly for members of minority groups; deteriorating neighbourhoods in which physical safety is a primary concern; and inadequate, often insensitive, human-service institutions.²⁹

Whatever improvements some women have experienced they have only been permissible to the extent that they assist, or at least do not hinder, the extraction of capital from labour. This is observable in the current reneging of hard won concessions like sole parent pensions, universal health care and free access to higher education. Capital is unconcerned with the identity of the labour it subordinates. The only structural imperative is that labour must be subordinated, that is, class inequality is the only social division essential to capital accumulation; other social divisions may be useful in various contexts but they are not indispensable.³⁰ This situation brings into question the feasibility of pursuing lasting equality within and between the sexes within the confines of the rule of capital.

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Within the women’s liberation movement those who sought an end to class inequality as a crucial ingredient in the emancipation of all women were not in the majority.\textsuperscript{31} In the pursuit of formal legalistic equality, many feminists neglected the struggle for substantive equality.\textsuperscript{32} This is reflected in Basu’s cross-cultural study of women’s movements:

Debates rage about the efficacy of quotas to increase women’s political representation, the viability of forming women’s political parties, and the emphasis that women’s groups should place on organizational and financial autonomy.\textsuperscript{33} A factor in this outcome has been the dominance of white middle-class feminists.\textsuperscript{34} The question of class inequality has not attracted sufficient attention from women who have benefited most under capitalism. Conde and others argue working class, socialist and labour women laid the foundation for many of the key campaigns of the women’s movement such as equal pay, pensions for single mothers and abortion rights.\textsuperscript{35} Sawer observed that in failing ‘to challenge effectively the rule of economic paradigms antithetical to the interests of women,’ the movement did not anticipate or prepare itself for the conservative restoration from the mid-1970s.\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{34} Curthoys, A. 1988. \textit{For and Against Feminism}. Allen and Unwin, Sydney; Kaplan, 1996; Franzway, S. 2000. "Sisters and Sisters? Labour Movements and Women's Movements in (English) Canada and Australia." \textit{Hecate}, 26, 2 (October), 31; Burgmann, 2003, 109, 126, 145, 156, 163. Middle class women have gained considerable advancement in income levels over working class women, for example (Hickman and Gunn, 2000).


\textsuperscript{36} Cited in Burgmann, 2003, 163.
Relatively privileged classes of women would seem to have the least interest in dispensing with the rule of capital that subordinates working class women, in all their variety. Game and Pringle were among the few to recognise the pivotal place of working class women in the battle for social emancipation: ‘Given the centrality of gender to capitalism, building on the strengths of working class women will be essential in the struggle to create a nonpatriarchal socialist society.’

Any comprehensive struggle for social equality requires the end of material advantages by the privileged classes. The practicalities of such a task have rarely been examined. Prominent feminists attacked patriarchy while simultaneously overlooking the class privileges that middle and upper class women derived from the exploitation of female and male working class. Socialist feminism was an unsettling, if problematic, reminder of the material and political contradictions of the women’s liberation movement that was ignored by cultural and postmodern feminism. Hartsock questions:

Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own

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theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the
world can be theorized.41

While working class women constantly confront social inequality, the form and content
of their struggle were neither understood nor embraced by the women’s liberation
movement and second wave feminism.42

This failure of solidarity is reflected in, and a product of, the neglect of the political
economy of working class women. Sawer describes the feminist impact on the discipline
of political science as ‘patchy.’43 As a marginal increase of female academics occurred
in the field, a late 1990s gender audit of the Australian Journal of Political Science,
revealed a very small proportion of feminist articles and authors.44 Similarly, in the
Journal of Australian Political Economy (JAPE), feminist articles and female authors
were under-represented amongst the contributions.45 Political economy studies that
examine the position of women, Aborigines, NESB groups and other marginalised
sections of the population are rare.46 In the first thirty volumes of JAPE, for example,
there are seven articles under the category ‘women and employment’ and one under

Parties and Political Science." In Grieve, N. and Burns, A. (eds.), Australian Women: Contemporary
Women's Movement in the Working Class." Sex Roles, 9, 4, 493-506; Curthoys, B. and McDonald, A.
1996. More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade: the Story of the Union of Australian Women. Bookpress,
Clarke and White (1983) noted similarly trends in first wave feminism.
Journal of Political Science, 39, 3 (November), 553. Sawer (2004, 562) reports tenured political science
positions occupied by women increased from 11% in 1979 to 29.7% in 1998. Most tenured female
political scientists are concentrated in the lower rungs of the academy.
Australian Political Economy, 31 (June), 112-133. The researcher’s survey of volumes since 1993
indicated a similar pattern. A January 2005 search of JAPE articles in APAIS, by the author, indicated 21
out of 331 (6%) articles contained some reference to women.
The articles on women were concerned with formal waged work. The JAPE survey noted that the small number of feminist articles and female authors reflected the lack of submissions rather than any aversion to publishing such material by the editorial committee. Other major Australian academic journals published few studies of the contemporary politics or political economy of working class women. Moreover, how satisfactory are existing understandings of Australian political economy, if the position of working class women is not examined? Braudel argued it is impossible to understand political and economic life ‘as a whole if the foundations of the house were not first surveyed.

Moreover, there is an absence of any consensus on appropriate analytical frameworks or methodological models for the construction of a gendered or feminist political economy. Waylen suggests this is a consequence of the embryonic state of the field.

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50 Beasley, 1994; Waylen, G. 2000. "Gendered Political Economy and Feminist Analysis." In Cook, J., Roberts, J., and Waylen, G. (eds.), Towards a Gendered Political Economy. Macmillan, Houndsmill, 14-38. The literature on feminist political economy frameworks is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. Beasley (1994, 109) has offered the most recent Australian contribution towards a model of feminist political economy; however her work is primarily concerned with theorising conceptual parameters. It is unclear whether, some ten years later, the field of gendered political economy is much closer to an applied model. Waylen (2000, 17) questions whether there is ‘the need for not just one model but many broader models which use a wider view of what constitutes knowledge.’ At this point there appears to be little consensus about the appropriateness of any model, let alone a multitude of them.
Given the political economy of women has been taught at Sydney University since 1973, the lack of progress perhaps testifies to a denial of its significance within and beyond the field. Murray noted many feminist political economy studies remained at the ‘add women and stir’ level of analysis, stopping short of a radical re-conceptualisation. Over ten years later a prominent feminist political scholar drew the same conclusion. Frankel asks:

Could it be that greater marketisation has proved agreeable to all those feminists working away in the arts, media niches, post-structuralist women’s studies courses, affirmative action jobs and so forth? As feminism drifts between the margins and the mainstream, has it made its peace with male-dominated markets and bureaucracies? Or will it take more ruthless New Right policies or stagnant years of social democratic Accordism to revivify an emancipatory movement now demoralized and depleted?

While many academic feminists have largely abandoned class and structural analyses, it is also the case that the institutional and masculinist barriers to the discipline of political economy, let alone a feminist perspective of it, remain formidable. Townsend suggests:

The current focus by feminism on less obviously materially generated forms of oppression may have more to do with pessimism about the possibilities of wholesale societal change, overcoming the oppressive implications of women’s responsibility for human reproduction under capitalism, than with the inadequacies of Marxism.

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51 Waylen, 2000, 14.
54 Sawyer, 2004, 553.
55 Frankel, 1992, 222.
Whatever the obstacles, the crucial task of examining working class women’s politics in Australia today has barely commenced.

Meiksins-Wood asks ‘what kinds of oppression does capitalism require, and what kinds of emancipation can it tolerate?’ Marx, Engels, Chomsky and others have argued bourgeois democracy maintains elite rule over populations under capitalism. Democracy becomes part of a propaganda apparatus that legitimates authority by creating ‘necessary illusions’ to prevent the mass of the population from ‘becoming so arrogant that they refuse to submit to the rule of others.’ Bourgeois democracy assists the few to rule the many, through ideology and civil controls in the first instance, and physical coercion in the second. Stabile argues:

Those who continue to believe in the possibility of revolutionary social change cannot abandon a belief in the power of critical consciousness and the tools that enable people (particularly those facing an unstable economic future) to make sense of their situation and learn how best to fight against it, and not simply make their peace with it.

A critical consciousness stemming from an ‘instinctive yearning’ for freedom and dignity is transmitted through generations of working class children. Though socialist thinkers expound these principles, their names are rarely uttered in working class backyards and kitchens. These ideals are driven by the experiences and conditions of

60 Chomsky and Herman, 1994.
62 Marx and Engels, 1947 [1848], 56.
existence of working people. It is argued that one of the kinds of oppression capital requires is that of working class women and their contribution to the reproduction of counter-hegemonic ideas and practices.\textsuperscript{63}

The central hypothesis of this study is that working class women are engaged in a wealth of political actions stemming from their everyday bid for survival. Their, often contradictory, collective self-activity coalesces around a politics antithetical to the logic of capitalism because capital’s viability depends on their exploitation and immiseration. As their politics is inimical to the social order, working class women are subject to continual surveillance and suppression.

Capital’s incapacity to attend to working class women’s interests means their political economy must encompass labour and struggles within and beyond the formal arena of the market and the state. Moreover their exclusion from institutional political arenas contributes to their greater involvement in extra-parliamentary actions.\textsuperscript{64} Working class women practice and reproduce a politics of survival and hope which informs their resistance strategies. Their struggles are waged on a material, emotional, cultural and ideological level. The strategies of social control and exclusion directed at working class women forces their politics and labour underground. It is through this submerged political economy that working class solidarities are forged and resistances to working class impoverishment mobilised. It is argued the working class suffers from the neglect


\textsuperscript{64} Campbell, 1984
of these understandings and the failure of organised labour to stand in solidarity with working class women.

The remainder of the thesis is organised into five chapters. With the exception of the methodology chapter, each examines working class women’s labour and politics across the political economic arenas of the formal political economy, the community and the household. The different chapters thematically analyse aspects of working class women’s agency and/or the structural constraints they confront across these domains.

Chapter Two surveys literature relevant to the political economy of contemporary working class women. Initially a brief review of the contemporary position of the national political economy is undertaken. As there are few specific texts on the topic of working class women’s political economy, the expanse of interdisciplinary feminist and women’s studies was searched for relevant fragments. Most were historical, theoretical or international accounts. For example, Waylen points out ‘feminist economics has, so far, concentrated on critiques without yet generating a large body of empirical material.’

Disavowal of the significance or possibility of class analysis by many academics has contributed to a retreat in contemporary Australian research from class analysis. Murray states: ‘This cavalier dismissal of women’s struggle has been called the politics

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65 Waylen, 2000, 26.
of retreat and it is shared by poststructuralism, postmodernism and cultural studies.\(^{67}\)

Consequently:

Marginalized women, particularly working-class women of colour and migrants, have problems with postfeminism, not just because it speaks in a language that is inaccessible but because it does not address concerns that they have, such as workplace reform, women’s wages falling behind their previous low levels, etc.\(^{68}\)

It is noteworthy that scholars and activists outside the university penned many of the texts utilised in this study.\(^{69}\)

The review traces evidence of the impacts of structural constraints in working class women’s lives. It considers literature on their relationships with social institutions of parliament, the welfare state, the market economy, and trade unions. Studies detailing the implications of these relationships on the conditions of existence of working class communities, households and individuals, are examined.

The second half of the literature review surveys evidence of working class women’s agency in their dealings with these social institutions and structural limitations. Responses are organised corresponding with their positions as gendered and classed voters, citizens, employees, consumers, and community (geographic or associative) and


\(^{68}\) Murray, 1997, 42.

family members. Overall, the review asks what is known of the political economy of working class women, how has the capitalist-dominated social structure influenced their politics and social conditions, and what have they thought or done about it.

Chapter Three explains the research approach. It evaluates the usefulness of existing methodological approaches for examining the broad political economy of working class women. More specifically, it considers mixed methods for collecting data on the material and non-material aspects of their political economic experiences. Further, the methodological implications of adopting a historical materialist framework, in order to provide a contextualised account, are discussed. The chapter details the methodology synthesised from these requirements and some of the challenges encountered during the process.

Chapter Four concentrates on the structures constraining and shaping the political economy of working class women in contemporary Campbelltown (NSW). Like the literature review, it is organised into a three-dimensional examination of the formal political economy, the community and the household. It interprets the data collected on the local political economy from the standpoint of local working class women. It asks what obstacles and opportunities the local political economy presents them with.

Space constraints required an analytical focus on specific elements of this relationship. The first section outlines the formal political economy and the structure of the local economy, its employment patterns and the role of the state in its perpetuation. The second section investigates how working class women’s labour and politics at the
community level are influenced by capital and the state. Issues of control over territory and environment (geographical and social) and resources (material and non-material) provide the thematic core of this section. The final component analyses how capital and the state have influenced working class women in the household and on an individual level. It focuses on household composition, material and non-material aspects of household relations, and the impacts on working class women’s health and well-being.

This chapter assesses how the relationship between working class women, capital and the state influences their politics, labour and relationships in the community and household. It questions the efficiency, sustainability, and legitimacy of capital’s dominance in Campbelltown and asks if local working class women benefit from its operation. The ways in which the impacts of capital pervade the three political economy arenas underscores the interconnectedness of its strategies of ruling. Moreover, the chapter maps out the social context and conflicts that shape, and are shaped by, working class women’s politics.

Chapter Five analyses working class women’s survival strategies, self-activity and resistances within the social terrain charted in the previous chapter. Again these responses are organised into the three sections of the formal political economy, the community and the household. It examines how working class women ‘make do’ in spite of the exigencies of capital and the state and what sorts of politics these conditions bring forth.
Again only emblematic exemplars were possible. In the formal political economy, working class women’s thoughts and actions in relation to parliamentarism and formal employment are central to the analysis. Their experiences of politicians, parties, bosses and the union movement are the main focal points. It explores their expectations, criticisms, and claims in relation to these sites of struggle and begins to reveal how their involvement in the formal political economy merges with their position in communities and households. The ensuing section examines how working class women’s labours in the community contribute to their survival and politics. It especially addresses the political significance of the work of neighbouring and social network maintenance, (that is the work of forging working class solidarity), the mobilisation of those associations in the battle for control over environment and resources, and the perpetuation of working class culture and values. The closing section draws out the struggles working class women face in implementing those social values in the household. It analyses their efforts to resist not just male dominance, but the more pernicious effects of commodity fetishism and the privatisation of social conflicts in particular. Their struggles to overcome capital’s effects on family life (broadly speaking) and their sense of self are amongst the more difficult battles working class women wage.

This chapter examines and demonstrates working class women’s political culture and agency. It underscores the ways that culture reverberates and is reinforced through their labours across the three domains of the broader political economy. The commonalities and differences in working class women’s politics is explained through reference to the specific social and personal contexts they inhabit. Similarly, their involvement in individual and collective actions is set against the opportunities and constraints before
them. The chapter challenges conventional stereotypes of working class women, and explains the variability in their political engagements and apparent dispositions as a result of historical and material circumstances. Overall, it is concerned with working class women’s perspectives on the social order, what they think must change, and what steps they might take to bring them into being.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis by drawing the analytical threads from the literature review and the two substantive chapters (Chapters Four and Five) together. Retaining the organisational structure of formal political economy, community and household, it brings together the two sets of questions raised in the Chapters Four and Five: how does the Campbelltown political economy operate in relation to working class women and why, and what do they think and do about it? These findings are simultaneously compared and contrasted to the existing literature. In closing, the chapter considers the broader political and theoretical significance of the research, in particular the relevance of socialist feminism and the political challenge that lies ahead.
2 Literature Review

A recurring criticism of political economy studies is they often lose sight of the social individual as a self-determining force, albeit within the context of inherited social parameters. The political economic lens must encompass a wider and more penetrating interrogation of not only structural processes and patterns, but also the counteractions to them, and the way in which those reactions reconfigure structures. Too often, political economic studies have examined one side of this dialectical relationship. Historical materialism assumes a broader conception of ‘labour’ as the creative energy or agency of individuals, that is “the living, form-giving flame” constitutive of society.” In this schema the working class are involved in a ‘cycle of struggle’ as a ‘dynamic subject, an antagonistic force tending towards its own independent identity.’

Guided by this social understanding, this review firstly considers the structural constraints working class women face followed by their necessarily subversive responses to them. A brief review of the contemporary structure of the national political

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economy is first conducted. Yet, working class women’s daily lives encompass an extensive range of social institutions and arenas. The review focuses on political and economic (broadly speaking) aspects of their experiences as citizens, workers, consumers, and family and community members. Examples from the interrelated domains of state, industry, trade unions, consumption, the household and neighbourhood are examined. The review examines evidence of working class women’s agency and resistance in these settings. In this way the forces of constraint and autonomy and the so-called public and private experiences affecting working class women’s lives are recomposed. This juxtaposing illuminates the pressured options working class women confront in their bid for autonomy and solidarity, and the contradictions and impediments produced – this is the substance of their gendered and classed conflicts.

**Structural context and constraints**

The relationship between the state, capital and labour is fundamental to understanding the perpetuation of social inequality and any resistance that arises to it. As a force for social emancipation political economy perhaps acts as a form of reconnaissance scouting the arenas of struggle and opportunities for resistance. This section considers literature about the structure of the contemporary Australian political economy in a global context. It then focuses on the standpoint of working class women within it, and it’s consequences for them.

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Major structural changes have been occurring in the global political economy since the fall of communism in the late 1980s. Since this time, capital has roamed the planet unfettered by any major oppositional bloc, for the first time in the history of industrial capitalism. In this environment, transnational corporations have become dominant over the international economy and have curtailed or coopted the power of national governments everywhere. This new world order is controlled by what Leslie Sklair terms a ‘transnational capitalist class’ consisting of ‘… the host state, the transnational corporations, and elements of the indigenous elite, senior state functionaries, leading politicians, and members of the learned professions.’ This new class has collectively reshaped the global economy in its interests, which is having particularly negative ramifications for the Australian working classes.

Freed from the political and territorial constraints of the Cold War world, global capital has severed its previous anchors in Western nations, and set sail for the lucrative shoals of underdeveloped Asian nations and other parts of the so-called ‘Third World’. To maximise profit accumulation, multinational corporations continually hunt out regions of high unemployment and cheap labour for their operations. The economic and social requirements of working people are of no consequence in this pursuit. While the national economies of Asia have mushroomed (albeit inequitably) the economies of Western

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8 Wheelwright, 1996, 7.
nations like Australia have declined.\textsuperscript{10} The implications of this according to American investment bankers is that

The shift in capital and technology to the Third World will undermine the value and bargaining power of labour in the rich First World countries. … the middle class dream will end.\textsuperscript{11}

One of the ways this occurs is through the sheer size and scale of multinational corporations, which account for over 40 per cent of the international goods trade.\textsuperscript{12} Through complex parent and affiliate networks, these corporations transfer their costs of production around the world and effectively evade national taxation requirements. This strategy further removes the control of profit away from national governments and priorities.

Australia is particularly vulnerable to these tactics because of the high level of foreign direct investment. It currently runs at over 26 per cent of gross domestic product; this is the highest ratio of all developed economies.\textsuperscript{13} The bulk of this investment is in ‘finance, insurance and the distributive trades.’\textsuperscript{14} Consequently, the opponents and exploiters of Australian labour are increasingly drawn from the ranks of the international, rather than national, bourgeoisie.

Corresponding with this new phase in Australian class relations has been a changed role for the state. Since the early 1980s, the New Right mantra of adherents within Liberal

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Cited in Wheelwright, 1996, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Wheelwright, 1996, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Wheelwright, 1996, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Wheelwright, 1996, 7.
\end{itemize}
and Labor party camps has emphasised deregulation, privatisation, low inflation and small government. Export sections of the Australian services and commodities industries have been particularly supportive of a neo-liberal international economic order.\footnote{Higgott, R. 1994. "Australia and the Pacific Region: The Political Economy of 'Relocation'." In Stubbs, R. and Underhill, G. (eds.), Political Economy of the Changing Global Order. Macmillan, Basingstoke, 532.} Meredith and Dyster state:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

These policies pave the way for greater foreign penetration of the national economy and relinquishment of government capacity to address the needs of the population. This process has broader political significance. As ‘the transnational agencies of globalisation [annul] the restraining and stabilising roles for capitalism of nation-states’, its legitimacy crisis deepens.\footnote{Burgmann, 2003, 332.} The less that national governments are able to cushion the excesses of unbridled capitalism, the clearer class antagonisms become.

The inroads international capital has made into the national economy, has afforded it considerable influence over major transformations of Australian industry. The growing dominance of service industries indicated in Figure 1 is part of a global upturn of investment in this sector. Since the mid 1980s, over half of all foreign direct investment has been in services, with finance and insurance industries attracting the greatest share.\footnote{Meredith and Dyster, 1999, 332.}
Simultaneously, manufacturing investment has been channelled to cheaper labour havens. Industrial deregulation and tariff reductions exacerbated structural unemployment because the capital-intensive nature and skills-base of service industries have not allowed for the absorption of retrenched manufacturing and agricultural workers. While women and men have been denied paid work by deindustrialisation, service industries have an appetite for lower waged and unorganised female workers. Moreover, in the retail and hospitality sectors women workers fulfill marketing strategies based on stereotypes of the sexual, material, emotional and feminine traits of women. Probert points out it is not that one occupational category is replacing another, rather that manufacturing has moved off-shore, and services (in the form of producer services particularly) have developed as part of the ‘centralised control functions’ of geographically dispersed transnational operations. Drawing on Sassen’s work, she contends that these ‘specialist experts in banking, accounting, law and other financial

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**Figure 1 Industry structural change in post-war Australia**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1961-3</th>
<th></th>
<th>1998</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture GDP %</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Mining GDP %</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Manufacturing GDP %</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services GDP %</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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19 Derived from Meredith and Dyster, 1999, 329.
and business services’ are concentrated in global cities like Sydney. There are other consequences for the Australian political economy. As Australia produces less of its own goods, the export-import ratio and current account deficit have deteriorated. For example, the trade balance worsened by $2071 million between 1996 and 1998 while the current account balance worsened by $2003 million for the same period. Australia’s current account deficit is the third highest of OECD countries. To finance this deficit Australia has fallen deeper into foreign debt, with net foreign debt increasing from $18,378 million in 1982 to $204,043 million in 1996 to $374,488 million in December 2003. What are the implications of these trends for Australia’s working classes?

All Australian governments have hitched the nation’s fate to the boom-bust cycles of the international political economy. Though the path of global integration has produced mixed fortunes for Australian working class women and men, at all times their political and economic horizons have been limited to the minor readjustments of a fickle and subservient client relationship. In the 1950’s, for example, the federal government’s

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24 Probert, 1995, 27.
most outspoken critic of capitalism, Eddie Ward, warned of the consequences of dependent development:

The very sovereignty of the Nation is in jeopardy … the Bretton Woods Agreement will enthrone a World Dictatorship of private finance … [it] quite blatantly sets up controls which will reduce the smaller nations to vassal States and make every Government the mouthpiece and tool of International Finance … World collaboration of private financial interest can only mean mass unemployment, slavery, misery, degradation and final destruction.  

Even though the Australian government is reticent to acknowledge the bleakness of Australia’s fate in this global political economy, others such as Singapore’s Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew have labeled Australia ‘the new white trash of Asia.’ The strategic threat of capital flight and Australian workers precarious positioning in the race to the bottom of the ‘free’ international labour market has generated fear and disunity within labour’s ranks.

The vagaries of international economic integration are not the sole cause of the position of the Australian working class; the domestic ruling class is equally culpable. The currents of international trade have generated relatively high national growth rates since the Hawke government’s deregulatory campaign of the 1980s. The orthodoxy that upheld these ‘economic successes’ ignores the corresponding decline in living standards, real wage cuts of over 10%, and ‘jobless growth’ with unemployment rates consistently higher than OECD averages for the period.

30 Cited in Higgott, 1994, 526.
33 Palat, 1998, 35; Meredith and Dyster, 1999, 285, Table 12.3.
The inequitable proportion of profit share accumulating to the ruling class is the main cause of these outcomes.\textsuperscript{34} In the year to December 2003 corporate profits rose 38.9\% (seasonally adjusted before income tax) while wages and salaries rose 5.6\%.\textsuperscript{35} Over the longer term, Saunders research indicates income inequality grew by 15.5\% to 20.9\% in the period 1968 and 2000.\textsuperscript{36} In 2002, 2\% of the national income was distributed to the poorest 10\% of the population; on this measure Australia ranked 79\textsuperscript{th} out of 100 with the average of all nations being 2.88\%.\textsuperscript{37} Income inequality is, of course, only part of the picture. Wealth inequality is a more significant measure and, deliberately, a much harder one to determine.\textsuperscript{38} Nevertheless, a survey of sources revealed ‘the combined wealth of the 197 biggest Australian fortunes equals the total after-tax incomes of the lowest 46\% of Australian taxpayers.’\textsuperscript{39} The richest 1\% accumulates 20\% of private wealth; 50\% of private wealth was held by the richest 10\%; and no net wealth went to the poorest 30\%.\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{Business Review Weekly’s} annual Top 200 list also offers insights into the good fortunes of Australia’s ruling class. The combined wealth of the top 200 rose from $21 billion in 1989 to $64.9 billion in 2002.\textsuperscript{41} These statistics are illustrative of the ongoing class struggle between capital and labour for control of the profits produced by the latter.

\textsuperscript{34} Palat, 1998, 36.
\textsuperscript{39} Aarons, 1999, 16.
\textsuperscript{40} Travers and Richardson cited in Aarons, 1999, 14.
Australian governments have continued to fulfill their historic role as facilitator of capital accumulation for the domestic and international ruling classes. The exposure of Bjelke-Petersen Queensland government’s role in succouring international capital was a rare instance of public questioning of the ostensible relative autonomy between the state and capital. Whitton contends that the regime offered ‘a case study of the ease with which a parliamentary democracy can become an authoritarian state’ and warned against viewing it as an exceptional episode in Australian political history.\textsuperscript{42} He points out the Fitzgerald Inquiry spoke to the condition of all Australian governments, not just Queensland.\textsuperscript{43}

How have working class women fared in this environment? The following section reviews literature about their specific position in the formal political economy, particularly parliamentarism, the official labour market and trade unions. It considers their relationship with the political economic arenas of the community and the household.

Liberal theory presents parliamentary democracy as a pluralist, impartial arbiter of the national interest based on the principle of political equality for all citizens irrespective of gender or class. From this perspective, working class women have as much right and opportunity to participate in and influence the governance of the nation as any other

\textsuperscript{42} Cited in David and Wheelwright, 1989, 188.
social group. As more women win political office, gender parity in the parliament remains elusive. Australian parliamentarism currently draws most of its representatives from two hierarchical, male-dominated, right wing political parties. Though working class women are more likely to associate with the ALP they have not been treated as political equals. According to Clarke and White

Labor women were the emotional ballasts of their families and stood behind their men in industrial disputes. Yet the party did not welcome them as participants, let alone equals ... Evening meetings, the demands of housekeeping and child rearing, as well as low levels of education for working class women all militated against female activity in the ALP. The ideology and practices of both major parties have profoundly influenced the level of female participation in the formal political arena.

The preselection process for both parties reveals a deep-seated contempt for working class female candidates. Simms found women candidates had a more equitable chance of preselection in the ALP than the Liberal Party. Nonetheless, nomination data indicate neither of the major parties achieved gender equality among successful candidates. The gap in the percentage of female nominees to those who become parliamentarians is indicative of the ongoing practice of running female candidates as ‘flagwavers’ in

marginal seats, particularly in the ALP. Simms earlier observations on the effects of these practices are salutary:

if women believe that discrimination will operate against their selection, then they are likely to weigh up possible humiliation and failure against the potential rewards which they perceive accrue to electoral office.

There has been a plateauing of female nominations for the lower house, notwithstanding the steady growth in female MHRs. This is mainly attributable to the increase in ALP female candidates as a proportion of all female candidates from 12% in 1993 to 18% in 2001. The Liberal Party contribution to all female candidates for the lower house has declined from 9% to 8% for the same period.

If women in general still battle to gain preselection, the implicit class criteria of the process discounts those of the working class. Liberal Party female candidates were expected to have substantial business experience and connections. ALP women were expected to be experienced in local government, business, trade unions or the media.

Typical occupations of working class women – retail and administration workers, nurses, factory workers, cleaners and housewives do not count in party preselection.

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52 Simms, 1994. Also: Masterman-Smith, H. 1997. "Jennie George: A Feminist Trade Unionist in the Making." Frontiers of Labour: Proceedings of the 5th National Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. (eds.), Bertola, P. and Bailey, J. ASSLH, Perth; Norrington, B. 1998. Jennie George. Allen and Unwin. St Leonards, NSW. Jennie George is a rare example of a woman of working class background who has achieved parliamentary office. George progressed from ice-cream factory worker to secondary teacher to union official and eventually to the ACTU’s first female president. George devoted inordinate amounts of time and energy to these activities, which in her view would not have been possible without sacrificing personal relationships and the possibility of having children (Norrington, 1998, 178-179). While Norrington cites a few women who have apparently struck a balance between a fulfilling family life and a high-powered political career, they are noteworthy for the importance of supportive partners and their rarity.
ALP selectors emphasised physical attractiveness. The Cinderella requirements of work history, maturity, media savvy and physical appeal are a tall order for most working class women; years of strenuous labour, financial pressure, family care and other class injuries do not a media starlet make. Both parties seek candidates who have been relatively advantaged by capitalism in terms of occupation and income. The most disadvantaged and dissident have no place. Even at the local level, female councilors continue to be predominately drawn from the middle classes. The preselection process exposes the hostility and disdain towards working class women within the party system and hence their ability or interest in pursuing social equality within the general population.

The continuing failure of the two-party dominated parliamentary system to appeal to or promote equal numbers of female representatives (let alone those of the working class) underscores the myth of political equality in Australian parliamentarism. The time and location demands of parliamentary work do not accommodate the cultural and familial patterns of working class women’s everyday lives; it is a world and class apart. As

54 Simms, 1994, 247-8. In 1987, average age of female candidates was 44 in the ALP and 42 in the Liberal Party. Candidates averaged two to three children in each party. In 1990, 78.6% of ALP female candidates had been party conference delegates and 60% were active in community service organisations, indicating the availability of substantial personal resources to devote to party and community work. By comparison, the NSW Health (2003) Adult Health Survey showed only 42% of the most disadvantaged SES quintile were members of local organisations. NSW Health. 2003. NSW Health Survey 2002 (HOIST). Centre for Epidemiology and Research, NSW Department of Health, Sydney
Simms notes, ‘responsibility for families, limited political resources, and socialisation’ deter their participation. The working class woman who is run off her feet will have less scope for formal political participation than the more affluent woman who can buy domestic assistance, live in more expensive housing closer to party headquarters, and afford the resources of computers, cars and good health, for instance, that make for an active public life. Moreover, the status and remuneration of parliamentarians, being well above that of working class women, increases the possibility of cooption and discourages the championing of class equality. This amounts to the commodification of democracy, that is, influence within Australian parliamentarism is dependent upon economic means. Hence, genuine democracy does not and cannot exist under capitalism, but rather reflects class divisions.

The bankruptcy of social democratic and liberal theories of parliamentarism has been long argued in socialist schools of thought. As the foregoing literature conveys, parliament does not reflect the democratic will of the Australian people, but rather the manipulation of that will by the machinations of parliamentary structures and party agendas among other factors. The parliament and the state within capital systems fundamentally operate to promote the accumulation of surplus labour, of which the vast

amount of corporate funding for both major parties is but one indication.\textsuperscript{62} Marx and Engels argued ‘the first step in the revolution by the working class …[is] to win the battle of democracy,’ not parliamentarism.\textsuperscript{63}

As capital is ceaseless in its expansionary logic, a separate structure is required to save it from its own destructive contradictions.\textsuperscript{64} In the Australian context, the state serves with increasing difficulty as the control room or command structure for capital, ensuring the economic, legislative, political, cultural and social conditions for the alienation of labour and the appropriation of surplus value.\textsuperscript{65} For the rule of capital to survive, parliament must be cleansed of those most likely to subvert the alliance between capital and the state. Irrespective of the proportion of women in parliament, few politicians stand in public opposition to capitalism or offer any alternatives to it. There is no necessary connection between the gender of parliamentarians and non-capitalist politics. Socialist theory sees the greatest potential for ending the rule of capital as stemming from those most exploited and disadvantaged by the current political economy, that is, the men and women of the working class and their supporters.

Many feminists and socialists have argued against parliamentary participation on the grounds that its patriarchal, hierarchical and conservative structure diverts attention and energy away from the more important tasks of extra parliamentary and direct action campaigns for social transformation. Others have pinned their hopes on a ‘revolution

\textsuperscript{62} AEC, 2004.
\textsuperscript{63} Marx and Engels, 1947 [1848], 41-42.
\textsuperscript{65} Burgmann, 2003, 332.
from within’.

Still others have argued the parliament is one useful vehicle for exposing the class hostilities of the state and promoting socialism. Referring to the western democracies, Lenin argued,

...it is only from within such institutions as bourgeois parliaments that Communists can (and must) wage a long and persistent struggle undaunted by any difficulties, to expose, dissipate and overcome these [bourgeois democratic and parliamentary] prejudices.

Lenin did not suggest parliamentary participation was the only or main arena of political struggle, rather socialist parties should not neglect it until such time as the working class views it as obsolete. How or when such a conclusion might be drawn when working people are denied a voice is problematic and never seriously debated. Though the Australian public expresses considerable skepticism about the Australian political system, there is little sign they entertain the possibility of an entirely new structure.

Notwithstanding the arguments for and against parliamentary participation, working class women do not abstain from voting (a viable, if technically illegal, possibility) and as a continuing part of their political practice it requires closer examination.

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67 Lenin, 1965 [1920], 60.
68 Lenin, 1965 [1920], 49-61.
70 AEC, 1999; Libertarian Workers for a Self-Managed Society (LWSS). 1998. "Towards and Anarchist Society" [Web Page]. Accessed 23rd August, 2004 at http://home.vicnet.net.au/~anarch/whoweare.html; AEC, 2004. Various small campaigns have been conducted by anarchists and socialists to encourage people to vote informally in protest of the parliamentary system, with little success. For example, the former Maoist Albert Langer served a three week gaol term for encouraging people to vote informally in the 1998 Federal election. The anarchist Libertarian Workers for a Self-Managed Society conducted a similar campaign during this election by running two Senate candidates on a Vote Informal ticket. Despite urgings from the Melbourne Age that the courts should deal them a similar fate to Langer, the Australian Election Commission opted to let the matter languish in obscurity rather than add grist to their mill (LWSS, 1998). Generally lower SES suburbs record a higher informal vote (AEC, 1999; AEC, 2004).
While Australian women were originally more inclined to vote conservative, the literature reports a growing convergence of gendered voting behaviour. This has been attributed to higher education and workforce participation levels of women and generational factors. Female labourforce participation increased by 52% between 1971 and 1991. Moreover, the increasing pro-Labor female vote has corresponded with the growing proletarianisation of women and feminisation of poverty, suggesting class identification is a more salient barometer of electoral behaviour than gender.

Although there are few studies of the voting behaviour of working class women specifically, Leithner’s work offers a starting point. Leithner found non-union women were 19% more likely to vote conservative than union women, but that union women were less likely to vote Labor than union men. He argues the sex segregated workforce underpins these differences. As women are concentrated in smaller workplaces they are allegedly likely to encounter more paternalistic labour relations, suppression of collectivist values and discouragement of unionism. While these are precisely the kinds

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77 Leithner, 1997, 43.
of worksites in which most working class women labour,\textsuperscript{78} there are perhaps further explanations for its relationship to their electoral behaviour. Firstly, Leithner provides little evidence that smaller workplaces necessarily produce a more compliant, less collectivist or anti-Labor constituency. Indeed, the opposite argument could be made that closer proximity with one’s exploiters generates greater hostility than in larger enterprises; however the capacity and scope for struggle are obviously different in such locations. Class conflict does not cease to operate outside the factory or mine gates. A more salient factor may be that unions and the Labor Party have been less interested in the plight of women labouring in the highly exploitative small to medium business sector. The role of state-sanctioned trade unions in disciplining the workforce, rather than mobilising them for social change, is crucial. While Leithner’s argument assumes working women are less likely to see through the political conservatism and anti-unionism of employers of their own accord, his investigation is limited by the absence of any class analysis.

The negligible research interest in working class women’s electoral motivations and behaviour is indicative of the low priority accorded to them by both sides of politics. Union women were the most likely to respond in kind through their voting behaviour in the 1996 Federal election, with 26% voting against the major parties\textsuperscript{79} and Labor has identified young ‘suburban women’ as a ‘crucial group of swinging voters’ since at least


\textsuperscript{79} Leithner, 1996, 43.
1987. Though Labor continues to poll most strongly in lower income suburbs where working class women are over-represented, these suburbs also record among the highest percentages of informal voting, reaching over 10% in some cases. It is impossible to tell whether these trends reflect voting errors or the intentional actions of a disaffected electorate.

Other studies have noted the political discontent of women voters. Maley’s work found, for example, that women view the party system more pessimistically and critically, and are correspondingly more detached and alienated from the political system than men. McCourt observed the entrenched skepticism of working class women towards the political system, suggesting ‘these feelings exist despite, or perhaps because of, the history of working-class families dependence on the largesse and favors of the political machine.’ Often gendered political analyses position women as the shunned and bruised victims of an elitist and male-dominated bastion. This is a truism for many women. Nevertheless, perhaps it is working class women who are the rejecters (rather than the rejected) of parliamentarism.

80 Chaples, 1993, 331. Bill Clinton was similarly eager to court the votes of estranged blue collar women during his bid for re-election (Leithner, 1997, 30).
81 AEC, 1999. For example, in the 1998 federal election, the two-party preferred Labor vote in the public housing suburbs of Claymore (82%) and Airds North (85%) were well above the national average of (51%). In 2004 the ALP support base at these booths had eroded but remained higher than the national average for Labor’s two-party preferred vote: the figures were Claymore (61%), Airds North (67%), and national (47%) (AEC, 2004). The informal vote has been consistently over 8% (10.34% in 1996) since 1993 at Liverpool West and over 7% at Guise. In 2004 these booths both recorded informal votes at 10% compared to a national figure of 5% (AEC, 2004).
82 Cited in Chaples, 1993, 330-331.
83 Lane cited in McCourt, 1977, 22.
84 Henderson, 1999.
It is one thing to register disenchantment with the existing political system; it is quite another to transfer support to an alternative political framework. It is clear that working class women have not supported socialist candidates or parties to any extent.\textsuperscript{85} Lenin’s call for socialist engagement with bourgeois parliamentary prejudices presupposes sufficient support to propel candidates into the system. Socialist contenders have been thwarted in part by the legacy of anti-communism during the Cold War and the corresponding material and ideological ascendancy of global capital.\textsuperscript{86} The consolidation of the media’s power to manufacture political and ideological consent for capitalism, the particularly conservative electoral and constitutional systems in Australia, continuing trepidation over the derailing of even Whitlam’s moderate experimentation, and the excesses of nominally communist states have also been contributing factors in the poor support for Australian socialism.\textsuperscript{87}

The disarray of the socialist Left has provided no clear or consistent engagement with the general public in recent times which was a factor in the creation of the Socialist Alliance in 2001.\textsuperscript{88} While there is some evidence, as outlined above, that a sizeable minority of working women are prepared to support non-major party candidates, only a minute fraction of this discontent has translated into electoral support for a socialist

\textsuperscript{85} In the 1998 federal election the socialist vote (Socialist Equity Party and Democratic Socialists) was 27358 for Senate candidates and 1909 for their lower house candidates (AEC, 1999). In the 2001 federal election the upper house socialist vote (Progressive Labor Party only) was 68483 (AEC, 2004). In the 2004 federal election, the socialist vote (Progressive Labor Party, Socialist Alliance and Socialist Equality Party) was 32443 votes for Senate candidates and 18842 votes for lower House candidates (AEC, 2004).


alternative. Whether this is attributable to shortcomings in socialist strategy or ideological appeal, or the constraints of the current political climate and circumstances upon its dissemination, is a crucial question. Parliamentary success is certainly unrealisable without an existing substantial support base. Working class women have had negligible opportunities to assess the proponents, practicalities, problems and potential of socialist politics.

Parliamentarism reflects a fundamental role the state plays as the control centre of capital. Feminist politicians and ‘femocrats’ (feminist bureaucrats) have pinned their efforts on the prospects of social change ‘little by little’ or the assumption that ‘revolution from within’ is feasible. Though the number of women in the Senior Executive Service has grown from 8% in 1988 to 21.8% in 1998, their effectiveness has waxed and waned within the context of the national and international political economics and in accordance with the political persuasion of changing governments. Their efforts have been relatively ineffectual in taming the ‘rough beast’ overseeing the

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89 See footnote 85. The socialist vote in recent federal elections reflects the varying nomination decisions of parties (often based on resource limitations). As candidates have not been nominated in most divisions or states, the above figures do not reflect the full extent of socialist support within the electorate.

90 Frankel (1992, 38) contends working class people have rarely encountered a ‘radical working class culture’ that articulates the hopes and possibilities for a non-exploitative social existence. In Campbeltown a lengthy work-in at Harco was one of the few experiments in workers control (Caldwell, L. and Tubbs, M. 1973. The Harco Work-In: and Experience of Worker’s Control. National Workers Control Conference Committee, Newcastle.)


92 van Acker, 2001, 71.
expansion of class inequality. There is little reason for working class women to place their hopes in the capitalist state and its apparatchiks, irrespective of their gender. Meszaros observes capital is an extra-parliamentary force that ultimately requires an extra-parliamentary challenge to its hegemony.

While femocrats have pursued a liberal rights-based or social democratic agenda (sexual, legal, financial, workplace, health and reproductive rights, for example), they have not seriously challenged the political economy as a whole. There is no feminist agenda on industrial democracy, nationalisation of productive resources, the socialisation of domestic duties, or the elimination of unemployment and poverty, for example. As Burgmann has noted, in the current context of neo-liberal restoration even a reformist platform appears radical:

A healthy dose of reformism would go a long way to confront neo-liberalism, because it is precisely the reformist gains of the twentieth century – the welfare state, minimum wages, penalty rates for antisocial working hours, job security, strong trade unions, public ownership of utilities and transport, public and universal systems of health and education – that neo-liberalism attacks.

The effectiveness of feminists within the state is necessarily constrained by the political environment in which they are operating.

As van Acker argues, femocrats made significant gains during Whitlam’s period of relative economic buoyancy, but have struggled to retain them under either Labor or

Coalition governments enamoured with neo-liberal economics. For example, the Howard government reduced the budget of the Office of the Status of Women by 40% in 1996 and cut $800 million from childcare services over four years. These cuts are in the face of increasing childcare demand. The neo-liberal agenda is concerned exclusively with providing conditions that facilitate the accumulation of private capital and femocrats have had the task of implementing the sexist and classist policy decisions of their political masters.

As public servants, they work for the government; as ‘insiders’ they dismiss lobbyists’ demands by referring to cutbacks in spending. As ‘outsiders’, on the other hand, equality for women becomes more difficult to achieve. Femocrats have become alienated and disempowered within the state apparatus and marginal to the everyday experiences of women in general. Socialist feminists argue legislative and policy reforms alone are insufficient to end women’s oppression. Rather, they argue ‘wealth and property should be redistributed if working-class women – and not just middle class women – were to advance their position.’

While it is true the state contains conflicting tendencies, some of which benefit the poor and others that oppress them, the gains have only ever been partial, tokenistic and reversible. Meszaros argues the state has gained greater importance in enabling ‘capitalism to absorb oppositions and put off contradictions.’ Progressive reforms to income entitlements, workforce participation and child-care, are unsustainable in the long-term, in a political economy propelled by the logic of capital accumulation. Capital

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97 van Acker, 2001, 67-68.
98 Millward, 1996a, 12; Burgmann, 2003, 127-130.
100 van Acker, 2001, 60.
101 Singer, 1996, 27.
must eventually commodify all human activity and planetary resources to satisfy its internal expansionary logic. Meszaros, following Marx, argues that once accumulation ceases to be possible, capital systems face crisis or implosion.\(^{102}\) In this view, state reforms that appease labour will never constitute a radical structural transformation under the rule of capital.

Capital systems are never totally hegemonic or monolithic. Its contradictions, appeasements and other weaknesses can be creatively exploited, usurped and subverted. In this sense, some reforms may allow for breathing space and the acquisition of resources with which to challenge the existing political economy and prefigure more radical social change.\(^{103}\) Stilwell makes a case for radical reformism:

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\ldots\text{reform continues to have its place, contributing directly to the amelioration of pressing social problems. But a revolutionary perspective must underpin it if reform is not to degenerate into a purely piecemeal pragmatism. Revolution in this sense means a transformation of values and social practices.}\]^{104}
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Too often seemingly radical reforms have turned into devices for more insidious forms of social control and pauperisation, as in the case of the welfare system (though this is not to argue against social security in the absence of an alternative means of survival). In other cases, reforms have been more nominal than real. Perhaps a telling sign of the implausibility of ‘revolution from within’, is the relative deterioration in working class women’s living standards vis a vis their middle and upper class ‘sisters’.\(^{105}\)

\[\text{References:}\]

\(^{102}\) Meszaros, 1995.

\(^{103}\) Stilwell, 2000.

\(^{104}\) Stilwell, 2000, 20.

\(^{105}\) Summers cited in van Acker, 2001, 71.
Irrespective of feminist efforts, the income gap between women has grown wider than the income gap between men since 1982.\textsuperscript{106} While working class women have become poorer in real terms, women in Band 1 of the Senior Executive Service increased their average yearly earnings by 81\% to $106,586 between 1988 and 1998.\textsuperscript{107} This places top femocrats in a class well above their sisters in the lower orders of the public service and lower income women in the general community. As van Acker has noted ‘Large salaries, working with the “enemy”, wearing expensive business suits, high heels and makeup created suspicion among women within the movement.’\textsuperscript{108} Like feminist politicians, feminist public servants face the contradiction of attempting to eradicate gender inequality from a system that bestows class privileges. It is an inconsistency not lost on sections of the women’s movement that were wary of the state’s tendency to coopt and neutralise radical dissent and claims through offers of money and power.\textsuperscript{109}

Despite the advance of individual, middle- or upper-class women during difficult economic times, recent government policies have contributed to undermining the position of many women (and men) in society.\textsuperscript{110} It is debatable whether the capitalist state and its servants (feminist or otherwise) have or can change working class women’s lives for the better on balance, or if it is only the gatekeepers that change.\textsuperscript{111} Burgmann asks: ‘To what extent can femocrats prosper the interests, even be aware of the problems, of women quite unlike themselves? Femocrats

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
  \bibitem{Kryger1999} Kryger, 1999.
  \bibitem{vanAcker2001} van Acker, 2001, 62.
  \bibitem{Burgmann2003} Burgmann, 2003, 153.
  \bibitem{vanAcker2001b} van Acker, 2001, 72.
\end{thebibliography}
were not *representative of* most Australian women; how, then, could they represent them?  

Some social movement theorists have defended the logic of statist engagement. This is understandable given their common avoidance or denial of class allegiances or conflicts. Social movements that do not include class equality in their platforms pose minimal, if any, threat to the existence and ‘destructive production’ of the capitalist state. It remains a political economy that relies on social and ecological division and devastation for its existence. The struggle for equal pay by the women’s and indigenous movements, for example, has been theoretically won but these legal rights have had less than the anticipated effect on working class people’s lives. Working class women are slipping further into poverty; their wages are still well below men’s and the gap between women’s wages is expanding.

For indigenous Australians the equal pay victory of the Gurindji people of Wave Hill Station was followed by the wholesale sacking of indigenous station workers and their perpetual marginalisation from the paid workforce. The environmental movement has been unable to curtail the worst environmental excesses of industry and governments, and the foundations for the sustainable provision of material needs (such as equitable

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112 Burgmann, 2003, 152.
ownership of productive resources including land and raw materials) have not begun to be laid. A postmaterialist position underscores the philosophy of some social reform movements, but in shifting the philosophical and political emphasis from capitalist economy to non-material ecology, the plight of the least advantaged citizens has often been lost.\textsuperscript{117}

Matching the priorities of disadvantaged communities and the environment in a capitalist context has proved a most intractable dilemma. Some of the worst human and ecological disasters have coincided with the poorest regions on earth: the logging of the Amazon basin; mass flooding in Bangladesh; and irradiation of Bhopal, the South Pacific and indigenous lands in Australia.\textsuperscript{118} It is hard to understand how social movements can contribute to a more humane and sustainable social and natural world without recognising the pivotal implications of class relations and conflict.

The limited benefits of the women’s movement for working class women have already been discussed. It is difficult to see how other social movements have fared any better in relation to this segment of the citizenry.\textsuperscript{119} It cannot be denied the Australian state has made concessions in response to social movement pressure. However, explicit demands for an end to poverty and the promotion of self-determination for all have made the least

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\textsuperscript{119} Burgmann, 2003, 331.
\end{flushleft}
inroads, for they require a radical transformation of the political economy. Moreover, working class women have not figured strongly in these movements except where their immediate interests and survival have been central, as in the case of the indigenous rights movement.

On the whole, the formal political structures in Australia have offered no effective avenues for working class women to address their everyday concerns; rather the government has systematically blocked all institutional means of dissent, as it is supposed to, within a capitalist political economy. The best that parliamentarism and statism have been able to manage has been "restructuring" without changing the structure itself as the embodiment of the hierarchical social division of labour, … to reform capitalism without altering its capitalist substance...

Working class women’s labour in the formal, informal and domestic economies is a fundamental precondition of Australian capitalism. Their activities in each

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120 Burgmann, 2003, 336.
123 Meszaros, 1995, xix, original emphasis.
interconnected sphere have been profoundly shaped by the status of the reserve army of labour, of which they have historically formed a sizeable contingent. Campaigns for women’s right to work have sidestepped the growing obsolescence of human labour within capital systems.

While the feminisation of work and poverty debates have been carried on extensively in Australia, they have been preoccupied with economic descriptions and less with political analysis. The concept describes higher female participation rates, the gendered polarisation of work practices, and the ‘generally inferior conditions [that] apply to more and more jobs for men as well.' In this sense, the feminisation of work is not only a gendered development, but also a classed one. Working class women have therefore


been pivotal to the process. The Australian experience of these trends relates directly to
the global feminisation of waged work resulting from the emergence of a new
ternational division of labour since the 1960s.\textsuperscript{128} De-skilling of work has facilitated the
entry of low-skilled female workers that has driven the feminisation of work.\textsuperscript{129}
Technological developments, such as computers, robotics and telecommunications, have
simplified production processes. More specifically, this involves

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\text{... the segmentation of the production process into discrete}
\text{stages, the more labor intensive of which are further}
\text{decomposed through scientific management principles into}
\text{simple, repetitive tasks requiring minimal skill and}
\text{training.}\textsuperscript{130}\]

They have also paved the way for business management techniques like ‘just-in-time’
production, targeted recruitment practices and associated organisational structures such
as informal subcontracting and homeworking networks.\textsuperscript{131} Corporations have adopted
employment strategies centred on the maintenance of a small core of highly qualified
employees, supplemented by a larger pool of short-term contract, part-time, casual and
temporary staff, usually in administrative or other lower waged fields where women
workers are over-represented. An example is the banking sector. Fagan and Webber state:

As automation has proceeded, so have changes in the gender,
working hours and occupations of banks’ workers. A highly

\textsuperscript{128} Wheelwright, T. 1980. "Cheap Labour Havens and De-Industrialization." In Crough, G., Wheelwright,
\text{\textit{et al.}, \textit{Australia and World Capitalism}. Penguin, Ringwood, Vic., 140-149.}
\textit{96-99}. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Nippon Electrical Company (NEC) selects female school-
leavers to work in its semi-conductor firm. Mitter discusses how unionisation is undermined by
personalised personnel management techniques, quality circles, involvement teams, shareholdings, profit-
sharing and the encouragement of tame unions under ‘single union’ policies. In Australia, similar
objectives have been pursued through the introduction of enterprise bargaining and individually negotiated
Australian Workplace Agreements, among other measures.
correlated shift towards part-time work and feminisation of the banks’ workforce has occurred.\textsuperscript{132} Deindustrialisation, which is typically understood as an issue affecting male workers, has also affected working class women.\textsuperscript{133} For example, between 1972 and 1983 female workers in metal manufacturing declined by 33 per cent, while male workers declined by 22 per cent for the same period.\textsuperscript{134} In essence, these trends have further entrenched dual labour markets that comprise a skilled core of professional, technical and managerial staff (mainly white and/or male), supplemented by a far larger contingent of peripheral unskilled, semi-skilled, and often female workers. At this end of the spectrum the majority of Australian workers labour for a diminishing and insecure wage under the auspices of increasingly regressive labour laws.\textsuperscript{135}

As the trade and craft expertise of organised male workers became increasingly obsolete through these ‘innovations’, multinational corporations (MNC) were freer to locate their enterprises wherever lower skilled labour could be found. The most vulnerable, marginalised and easily manipulated (‘flexible’) workers, such as working class women and especially women of colour, were sought out.\textsuperscript{136} In recent decades, these reconfigurations have produced a global assembly line of women workers who labour in insecure, debilitating and poorly paid jobs from the export zones of Mexicali\textsuperscript{137} to the

\textsuperscript{133} McQueen, H. 1982. \textit{Gone Tomorrow: Australia in the 80s}. Angus and Robertson, Sydney; Probert, 1995, 25.
\textsuperscript{134} Bulbeck, 1993, 35.
\textsuperscript{135} Probert, 1995, 31.
\textsuperscript{137} Located in the northern Mexico border region with the United States, this area produced more than half the US imports under the export-processing tariff provisions from less developed countries in \textit{maquiladoras} (assembly plants). Nationally they numbered over 1000 with a labour force greater than
outwork precincts of New York, Melbourne and Sydney. In Australia, this issue has gained increased media prominence following union research that estimated at least 330,000 outworkers laboured on these shores. In other western nations, MNCs are returning to the industrial wastelands of the West (created by their earlier flight to cheaper production sites) with a very different set of working conditions on offer involving reduction of wages, security, skill levels and bargaining power.

Lynd contends ‘in the [present] period of decaying imperialist capitalism, it is as if the reserve army of labour becomes the whole world.’ The feminisation of labour markets has burgeoned at a time when

74,000 in the mid-1980s. At that time they were ‘Mexico’s second most important source of foreign exchange.’ (Tiao, 1990, 196-197.)


Mitter, 1986, 80-99; Fitch, R. 1993. The Assassination of New York. Verso, London, 23; Martens, M. H. and Mitter, S. 1994. Women in Trade Unions: Organizing the Unorganized. International Labour Office, Geneva; Amott, 1998. Using the example of the Scottish, South Wales and Irish electronics industries, Mitter outlines the reasons why multinational companies (such as NEC, Motorola, Matshushita, Mitel, Siliconix, National Semiconductor, Borrough, Honeywell, NCR, IBM, Hughes, Burr-Brown and General Instruments) are transferring production from newly industrialising regions of the Third World to the de-industrialised, peripheral and declining regions of the First World. Among them is the reduced appeal of the newly industrialised countries (NICs) as wages rise through the actions of increasingly militant and organised working classes in those areas (Mitter, 1986, 86; Bello, W. and Rosenfeld, S. 1990. Dragons in Distress. Penguin, London). It is cost-effective to locate plants near targeted markets. ‘This is especially so now that a sufficient reserve of cheap labour among the unemployed of the West can assure an effective check on potential wage increases’ (Mitter, 1986, 80).

Cited in Meszaros, 1995, 237 original emphasis.
... the antagonistic inner dynamic of the capital system now asserts itself – in its inexorable drive to globally reduce ‘necessary labour time’ to an optimally profitable minimum – as a humanly devastating trend to turn the working population everywhere into an increasingly superfluous labour force.\textsuperscript{142}

Hence, the reserve army of women workers has transformed into an underemployed, underpaid, insecure and ever more superfluous army.\textsuperscript{143}

This conclusion seems to be contradicted by declines in official unemployment over the past decade (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Australian Unemployment Rate, October 1994 to October 2004\textsuperscript{144}**

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{unemployment.png}
\caption{Australian Unemployment Rate, October 1994 to October 2004}
\end{figure}

However, the manipulation of such statistics is widely recognised and the distribution of unemployment varies greatly across sub-populations.\textsuperscript{145} These statistics do not reveal the level of underemployment in the workforce. A study of casual workers for example,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} Meszaros, 1995, 250 original emphasis. Also: Stilwell, 2000, 181-191.
\end{itemize}
found 65% were unsatisfied with such work.146 Moreover, Stilwell notes ‘despite some reduction in official unemployment in that decade, an estimated 850,000 children in 1999 were living in families where no one had a paid job.’147

Meszaros argues the usual strategies of economic or military imperialism used to displace the chronic systemic underemployment of labour ‘surplus to requirement’, have become more untenable.148 Instead, advanced capitalist nations are being forced to deploy increasingly punitive, deceptive and authoritarian measures to deflect the social and political destabilisation while maintaining conducive conditions for capital growth. ‘Flexible’ casualisation, declining real wages and the rollback of the welfare and labour entitlements are the blunt end of these accommodations to capital systems.149

The structural contradictions and limits of capitalism underscore the political economy of working class women’s labour today. Rosewarne evaluated the impact of decades of feminist interventions on issues around women’s work. He concluded:

On the one hand, some of the barriers to women’s entry into higher paid occupations have been broken down. On the other, many of the longstanding obstacles in labour markets to women’s economic advancement have remained while new barriers are emerging.150

The most significant recent struggles have revolved around comparative worth protocols, albeit within the context of the Howard government’s attack on workplace

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147 Stilwell, 2000, 84.
150 Rosewarne, 2001, 133.
legislation generally and women’s civil rights legislation (nationally and internationally).\textsuperscript{151} Comparable worth cases, if achievable, may help ameliorate gender inequality, but they cannot in themselves alter the political and economic structures that reproduce those inequalities through the appropriation and control of labour by capital.

These campaigns stem from longstanding debates over the sexual division of labour. Of particular concern has been the disproportionate representation of women amongst the lowest paid, most heavily casualised, and least unionised occupations and industries.\textsuperscript{152} Outwork and sweatshops, for example, are amongst the most exploitative areas in which working class women, especially NESB women, are concentrated.\textsuperscript{153} These trends are partly due to the persistent division of the labour market along sexual, cultural and, of course, class lines.\textsuperscript{154}

Labour hierarchies are the basic mechanism through which surplus labour is extracted, but this does not explain why working class women are situated on the lowest rungs. Curthoys examined various explanations including biological, socialisation, human capital theory, labour market segmentation theory, employer discrimination and unionisation effects. She concluded the sexual division of labour in the paid workforce

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\text{...is the product of a fundamental contradiction between the continuation of a family household structure and capitalist}
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\textsuperscript{151} The Howard government refused to sign the maternity leave protocol of the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (Rosewarne, 2001, 129).
\textsuperscript{152} Probert, 1995; Rosewarne, 2001; Pocock, Prosser, Bridge, 2004.
\textsuperscript{153} Tate, 1994b.
relations of production. The sexual division of labour we observe, and the sexist ideologies in which we live, register this contradiction.155 She attributes the ongoing burden of household work on women to a combination of ‘bio-cultural tradition’ and the machinations of capitalist labour markets. These explanations do not adequately analyse why distinct classes of women experience the sexual division of labour differently.

Sexual divisions of labour have produced worsening returns for many women. In Australia, the real average incomes of full-time female workers is estimated to have dropped by 9 per cent between 1982 and 1997; this figure conceals a 22 per cent increase in real average wages by the top 10 percent of female income earners and a dramatic decline in the incomes of working class women.156 The gap between women’s wages is expanding more quickly than that between men’s wages.157 In some contexts women are finding employment easier to obtain than men.158 Nonetheless, the male average income ($34,460) remains higher than women’s ($23,599).159 In Australia, middle and upper class women have generally prospered while many working class women and men continue to struggle for their existence. Curthoys contended: ‘The demand for social justice for women as an independent demand can lead to a situation where relatively privileged women seek to advance their own position further over that of relatively unprivileged men.’160

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156 Rosewarne, 2001, 133.
157 Gunn, 2000b.
While patriarchy is a concept used to describe public and private sexism by men, class prejudice within the sexes tends to be downplayed by non-socialist feminists. In her work on female tobacco factory workers, for example, Pollert noted:

The general attitude that girls were conscientious but a bit dull was echoed by the woman personnel officer … who was dumfounded that I, or anyone else, could possibly be interested in talking to ‘her’ female factory workers, let alone learn anything new from them. Coming from a woman, these doubts showed that patronising attitudes to women workers are class attitudes, not solely based on the male sex or ‘patriarchal’ views.161

Different gender structures are tolerable within capital systems; class equality is not.162 Arguments for sexual equality within the workforce do not deal with the more fundamental question of which class of men should women be treated equally to; moreover, the shortage of jobs to employ an expanded labour supply is once again overlooked.

Marxist feminists once argued the efforts of working class men and their unions to exclude women (particularly married women) from employment were a working class strategy to bolster the family wage163; it is an explanation that carries far less weight in union treatment of women workers today. Brenner and Ramas observed

… in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the entry of women into a trade did indeed depress the wages [the working class family] could command, by increasing the labour supply, undermining claims of skill, and supplying less industrially aggressive workers.164

162 Townsend, 1996, 225; Burgmann, 2003, 163, 337.
164 In Curthoys, 1986, 331.
Today depressed wages, irrespective of gender, are a reality that necessitates women’s entry into the labour market. The union movement has failed to stem the decline in working class women’s real wages and the growing disparity between female workers.

Historically, unions have not encouraged female members into their ranks and even less so into union officialdom.165 Under contemporary circumstances where women are increasingly household breadwinners there is less cause or excuse for their exclusion, yet women comprised only 11% of trade union officials as of 1990.166 This pattern is reflected globally with less than 5% of International Federated Council of Trade Unions (IFCTU) affiliated unions being led by women.167

Under capitalism trade unions have typically carried out a defensive and pacifying role in the workforce, rather than being agents for radical social change.168 White outlined one aspect of the union policy of appeasement and accommodation to capital:

There has been a trend over the last few years for industries which have a high percentage of women, to negotiate with unions for union coverage. Part of the ‘package’ worked out … includes payroll deduction of union dues, union preference, and closed shop arrangements. These deals suit the unions, because they increase their membership – and income – with comparatively little extra work; and they suit the employers … they will not have any disruptive demarcation disputes … 169

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166 Farrer, 1993, 235;
169 White, 1984, 114.
With this kind of deal the risk of any sort of industrial dispute was minimised. While women’s unionisation rates increased between 1910 and 1985 there was no corresponding change in the occupational sexual division of labour.\textsuperscript{170} Moreover, the practice of concentrating on the conditions of full-time permanent staff at the expense of part-time and casual workers, which are disproportionately working class women, has also been problematic.\textsuperscript{171}

Greenwood’s account of the Perth laundry workers strike in 1982 offer some insight into why the union movement has been less than interested in organising working class women.\textsuperscript{172} In this instance, 150 workers (139 were migrant women) struck over unsafe conditions, wages and a lack of confidence in the management at the Hospital Linen and Laundry Service. Because of their industrial action the women were subjected to an extensive media attack centring on their tactical and temporary elevation to an essential service and their unfeminine behaviour. The Minister and senior government officials condemned them: ‘As women they should be ashamed of their irresponsibility’, ‘I’m not having a group of women telling me what to do!’\textsuperscript{173}

Despite support for their industrial action by rank and file unionists in other industries, the Trades and Labour Council refused to support them, which eventually led to the workers demoralisation and defeat. Greenwood explains this as a product of the sexism and elitism of a male-dominated union movement. This was certainly evident during

\textsuperscript{170} Mumford, 1989, 98.
\textsuperscript{171} White, 1984; Rosewarne, 2001, 132.
\textsuperscript{173} Greenwood, 1984, 66.
their campaign (the 11 male strikers were not dismissed), yet workers felt there was more to it:

We are all supposed to be fighting for better conditions and better wages but we seem to be fighting one another. The bigger you are the less they care about the little unions. We were proof of that because the TLC weren’t interested.174 Greenwood’s explanation overlooks the conservative position of trade unions as the industrial arm of the Australian Labor Party, a party openly supportive of ‘free’ market capitalism and, at the time, on the verge of a federal election from which the corporatist Accord would emerge.175 Placing their faith in the bankrupt ‘trickle down’ theory, they are ideologically and practically opposed to any political platform that would jeopardise capital accumulation.176 The fight for better wages and conditions is necessarily a fight for a greater profit share for workers; the ALP and trade unions have instead overseen a decline in real wages and conditions.177

Greenwood argues male union officials have contributed to the myth of working class women’s incapacity for militancy and thwarted the success of their industrial actions. They have had to battle not only the bosses but the male-dominated union hierarchy. As in many industrial disputes involving women workers the union officialdom are ‘caught with their pants down’.178 The case of the Federated Ironworkers Association’s support

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176 Beilharz, 1994; McCann, 1994, 62.
177 Aarons, 1999, 59-60. Aaron’s calculates between 1982 and 1997 the average after tax median income fell by 2% in real terms. The drop was greater for lower income earners. In comparison, for the same period the top 25% of income earners increased their wages and salaries by 100% in real terms.
178 Greenwood, 1984, 63.
for the sacking of married women workers at BHP’s Lysart factory in the early 1980s is an example.\(^{179}\) Though these cases are somewhat dated, McCann writes of the continuing influence of ‘anti-communist and anti-feminist’ union officials in many female-dominated unions and the deterrence of militancy within the right-wing dominated movement generally.\(^{180}\)

In mid-2003 a small band of mainly female manufacturing workers employed by Morris McMahon at Arncliffe received the same lesson. Their strike for an increase from their $12 per hour wage and to defend conditions were met with limited support from the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) in the form of financial support and some picketers. It would not however support their defiance of Supreme Court orders that rendered the picket inoperable or encourage bans on company suppliers. According to Cook, this is one more instance of the AMWU ‘outright collaboration with the manufacturing bosses’.\(^{181}\) More broadly, he contends the failure of the union movement to prevent the introduction of enterprise bargaining ‘atomised industrial struggles and saw workers in small factories abandoned.’\(^{182}\) The abandonment of collective bargaining has stemmed the flow of industry wide gains to smaller and industrially weaker worksites where working class women are predominantly employed.\(^{183}\)

According to labour market segmentation theorists the feminisation of work is a political strategy to undermine workforce militancy. It is argued working class women are:

\(^{179}\) McCann, 1994, 62.

\(^{180}\) McCann, 1994, 62.


\(^{182}\) Cook, 2003.

\(^{183}\) Stilwell, 2000, 86; Burgmann, 2003, 118.
… slotted into the inferior occupations by the capitalists who recognise that placing women into these tasks, rather than men, dampens the potential political impact of this labour movement (proletarianisation).\textsuperscript{184}

Rubery contends that the relatively short timeframe in which women have been in the labour market en masse has been insufficient for them to organise effective unions to resist these tactics.\textsuperscript{185} However, Rubery overlooks the historical involvement of working class women in the formal and informal workforces, and their traditions of militancy and resistance, because her sights are fixed on orthodox labourist politics.\textsuperscript{186}

The feminisation of work does appear to have triggered greater female unionisation,\textsuperscript{187} but it is inappropriate to reduce working class women’s politics, once again, to this relatively contained realm of resistance. The feminisation of work has involved an intensification of super-exploitative working conditions for working class women. Unregulated capital has once again controlled their homes as the links between formal and informal economies become even more entwined:

\textsuperscript{184} Mumford, 1989, 95.
\textsuperscript{185} Cited in Mumford, 1989, 97.
\textsuperscript{186} McQueen, H. 1970a. "Laborism and Socialism." In Gordon, R. (ed.), The Australian New Left: Critical Essays and Strategies. William Heinemann, Melbourne; Irving, T. 1994. "Labourism: A Political Genealogy." Labour History, 66 (May), 1-13. As outlined by Irving (1994), there is some contention over the definition and uses of the term ‘labourism’. Irving argues the term has been variously employed to describe ‘the practices and ideas of labour parties,’ a politics concerned with the ‘immediate concerns of the worker’, ‘the effects of bourgeois hegemony on the labour movement’, ‘an anti-doctrinaire, pro-capitalist, “job-conscious” rather than class-conscious labour movement’ and that it is intrinsically parliamentarian. Traditionally used in a pejorative sense to depict the non-Marxist, non-revolutionary elements of the labour movement, ‘labourism’ has recently been reinvented by right-wing labour as its ideological platform for ‘civilising capitalism’ (Irving, 1994, 8). He points out intellectuals have used the term to label ‘social movements and subordinate classes or groups [as] … either conservative or revolutionary’ (Irving, 1994, 9). Here the term ‘labourist politics’ refers to a narrowly defined politics, which is solely concerned with addressing the immediate concerns of the formal workforce and within the confines of capitalist parliamentarianism. It is a politics that excludes unorganised labour, those in the reserve army of labour, and those political struggles beyond the point of production. The sweep of working class women’s politics therefore remains hidden and devalued by such agendas.
... by subcontracting industrial production to informal factories and home-based workers, employers can minimize competitive risks, wages, and the threat of unionization, while maximizing their flexibility in hiring, their overhead costs, and their production process.\textsuperscript{188} Trade unions have been slow to grapple with the return of these Victorian working conditions to the homes and neighbourhoods of working class women.

Conventional union structures and practices do not have the capacity to meet these challenges. For example, in Australia the permit system for homeworking has effectively criminalised the work of tens of thousands of women who do not meet the narrowly defined regulations.\textsuperscript{189} Twenty years ago, Margaret Power noted the direct connection between increased homeworking and outworking and the reduction in blue-collar jobs for working class women following the decline in manufacturing industries.\textsuperscript{190} Such companies have no need to relocate their operations overseas, when they can exploit the feminised ‘third world’ within Australia.\textsuperscript{191} Underpinning these operations is international capitalism, which inevitably produces an international underclass as it increasingly concentrates wealth into ruling class hands. This is achieved by polarising the wage structure through winding down traditionally unionised sectors, such as manufacturing.\textsuperscript{192} This calls into question the ability of conventional union strategies to address this complex arena of class struggle.

\textsuperscript{189} Tate, 1994b, 68-70.
\textsuperscript{192} Probert, 1995, 30.
Lack of support and, at times, overt hostility have continued to mar working class women’s experiences of unionism and have contributed to the downward trend in female unionisation rates in the post-war period (see Figure 3).\textsuperscript{193}

**Figure 3 Trade Union Membership Rates, 1976 to 1999\textsuperscript{194}**

Total union membership fell further to 23% in 2002-2003 where it appears to have leveled off, at least temporarily.\textsuperscript{195}

Combet has vowed to ‘rebuild the union movement from the ground up’ by ‘mainstreaming’ organising, insofar as it does not jeopardise investment and employment; two seemingly incompatible aims in the context of global chronic unemployment and systemic crisis.\textsuperscript{196} Nonetheless, the union movement remains fastened to a subservient accord with capital and will brook no ‘out-dated, class war


\textsuperscript{195} ABS, 2000.

\textsuperscript{196} Combet cited in Cooper, R. 2003. "Trade Unionism in 2002." *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 45, 2, 208. Combet’s comment was in response to industrial provocations from Anthony Abbott MHR.
hysteria.\textsuperscript{197} If class conflict is irrelevant to economic growth, there would be no need to protest its appeal. Expunging class antagonisms from union platforms does not make it disappear. It leaves the destructive contradictions of the capitalist political economy for working class women and their communities to fight.

In failing to effectively stand by working women, the union movement has sown the seeds of its own decline, for it is precisely this segment of the working class who are the backbone of their organisations either directly or indirectly through the encouragement and support of the unionism of their menfolk.\textsuperscript{198} Moreover, active union membership requires money, time and emotional resources. According to Donaldson, workers’ time has increasingly been usurped by the surplus labour demands of industrial capitalism.\textsuperscript{199} The space for collective organisation has been eroded. This theft of time has undermined participation in all activities outside the workplace, from grassroots groups to organised struggles.\textsuperscript{200} Working class women have been vital managers and synchronisers of working class time; its commodification has robbed them of a crucial element of class resistance against the broader alienation of labour.\textsuperscript{201} The trivialisation of women workers’ concerns by the union movement may be its death knell.\textsuperscript{202}

\textsuperscript{197} Combet cited in Cooper, 2003, 213.
\textsuperscript{200} Meszaros, 1995, 252; Donaldson, 1996, 159-160.
\textsuperscript{201} Donaldson, 1991, 73; Donaldson, 1996, 49.
\textsuperscript{202} White, 1984.
Working class women’s trade union concerns reflect the interconnectedness of their paid and unpaid labour. Time to meet commitments outside the paid workplace such as childcare, maternity leave, social activities and women’s health are high priorities for women workers. The long hiatus between the ACTU’s Working Women’s Charter of the late 1970s and its current Work/Life campaign has resulted in little progress on these issues.\(^{203}\) In the current context of labour market deregulation and growing workforce insecurity it is difficult to see how the union movement, beholden as it is to capital, will bring about any substantial change in the situation.\(^{204}\)

Rather than paid work liberating working class women from domestic drudgery, they now bear the burden of paid and unpaid labour because male partners fail to share in the domestic workload or there is an increasing absence of male partners.\(^{205}\) In 1984 women spent 31.2 hours per week on housework compared to 13.7 hours by men.\(^{206}\) A report from the Office for the Status of Women indicates little change in the gap between men and women’s domestic and childcare work (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).

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\(^{206}\) Haralambos et al., 1996, 443.
Figure 4 Mean number of minutes per day mothers and fathers spent in domestic activities by day of the week (adjusted for time spent in employment activities)\textsuperscript{207}

![Figure 4](image)

Figure 5 Mean number of minutes per day mothers and fathers spent in childcare by day of the week (adjusted for time spent in employment activities)\textsuperscript{208}

![Figure 5](image)

Few time-use and household work studies to date have interrogated class differences in the distribution of domestic labour.\textsuperscript{209} Baxter emphasised the variability and


\textsuperscript{208} Bloomfield, 2004, 35.
inconsistencies in the findings of such studies. Contrary to earlier studies, her own quantitative research found ‘working class households have more egalitarian child care arrangements than middle class ones. A similar pattern was not apparent, however, in the division of routine housework tasks, or the division of time on housework.’

Baxter noted, but did not factor into her analysis, that the latter findings on housework time and tasks did not account for greater use of ‘labour-saving’ equipment and ‘paid help’ in higher income households. The distribution of emotional and community labour was also overlooked. Overall, working class women still performed more domestic labour than working men. No explanations were offered as to why working class households recorded greater equality in the domestic division of labour than other classes or how the rise in female-headed households might impact on these findings.

Research by Donaldson and Campbell offers some qualitative evidence of a gradual redistribution of domestic work within working class households. This perhaps reflects structural factors including the lack of affordable childcare, anti-family welfare provisions and the declining real value of working class (particularly women’s) wages. Horin notes

...Australia is not an easy place for working women – let alone working sole parents – with costly childcare, little paid maternity leave, poor training opportunities, and family-

\[\text{References}\]


213 Aarons, 1999; van Acker, 2001, 68.
unfriendly workplaces; and a culture that encourages mothers into part-time and casual work with subsequent low earnings. Working class women are finding work more readily than men, albeit at a lower wage and with more precarious conditions. The impoverishment of working class households has involved the conventional male breadwinner and housewife family structure necessarily giving way to working poor couples. Under these circumstances working class men would appear to have little choice but to share more equitably in domestic labour if their families are to survive the onslaughts of class deprivation.

A study of young men and women’s expectations of childcare and household work distribution suggests at the onset of working class relationships there are significant differences between the genders. Pocock found a spirit of domestic cooperation had not been internalised by young men (irrespective of class), as many hoped to find a partner who would perform the bulk of domestic work. Working class girls were determined to find partners who would share the load. This assertiveness was less apparent among girls of middle class backgrounds.

Social reproduction and domestic labour debates have been closely concerned with the politics of working class women. Marxist feminists have offered varying perspectives on the function and value of women’s work in the family. Benston, for example, explained that the family is the primary site of social reproduction as it plays the indispensable role

of supplying the capitalist mode of production with labour power. In this schema, women are the main providers of this free service and commodity as well as a reserve army of labour. The implication of their economic dependency on men and capitalists is that a woman is

… denied an active place in the market, has little control over the conditions that govern her life. Her economic dependence is reflected in emotional dependence, passivity, and other ‘typical’ female personality traits. She is conservative, fearful, supportive of the status quo.

According to Ansley, the housewife’s supportiveness and nurturance act as a ‘safety valve’ that absorbs the frustrations of alienated workers and thereby cushions and deflects their revolutionary impulses from the true source of their oppression, that is, capitalism. Cooper was keen to point out the conservative ideological function of women’s social reproduction work. Following Horkheimer, he contended the family is a site of ideological reproduction where work discipline, conformity and deference to authority are instilled in successive generations of working class children. Feeley too, noted the authoritarianism of the patriarchal nuclear family. These writers reduce the working class household, particularly the nuclear variety, to an institutional pre-requisite of capitalism. Working class women are by implication unwitting pawns in the maintenance of this Orwellian existence. While it cannot be denied that far too many families are indeed sites of oppression and violence, it is misleading to suggest this is all they are and all they can be. The history of working class women’s class struggles has

220 Cited in Haralambos et al., 1996, 389
221 In Haralambos et al., 1996, 389.
222 In Haralambos, et al., 1996, 389.
been intimately tied up with their familial position in positive and negative ways. Further, to suggest working class women convey only reactionary ideas to their children, underestimates their emancipatory vision and over-simplifies the complexities of political socialisation. These authors uncritically accept the influence of capitalist ideology on their own interpretations of working class life.223

Others did not make the mistake of dismissing the centrality of working class women’s politics to class struggle and its radical capacity. Dalla Costa and James, for example, challenged the myth that working class women’s social isolation resulted in their political impotence and conservatism. Instead they suggest this well-rehearsed fiction hides two vital historical factors:

… first, that to the degree that the working class has been able to organize mass struggles in the community, rent strikes and struggles against inflation generally, the basis has always been the unceasing informal organization of women there; second, that in struggles in the cycle of direct production, women’s support and organization, formal and informal, has been decisive. At critical moments this unceasing network of women surfaces and develops through the talents, energies, and strength of the ‘incapable female’. But the myth does not die.224

Despite Dalla Costa and James’ defence of working class women’s capabilities, they later undermine their own argument in a way that helps explain why the myth of women’s passivity persists. They are unable to translate working class women’s capacity

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223 Matthews, 1984; Walkerdine, V. and Lucey, H. 1989. Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socialising Daughters. Virago, London. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) provide a detailed account of how the state, the church and the business sector actively fostered the notion of working class families and mothers as intrinsically authoritarian. This ideological device was utilised as a form of social control to pressure working class women into internalising the dominant middle class values of consumerism, respectability, domesticity and sexual subordination. These matters are examined in more detail in Chapter Five.

to resist capitalism into an equally effective resistance in their relations with men. In the latter context, the working class woman is viewed as ‘the slave of a wage slave.’\footnote{Dalla Costa and James, 1997 [1972], 50.} While there is no doubting the degradations and abusive potential of economic dependency for anyone, be it on an employer, friend or family member, this formulation casts working class women as hapless victims of male power and it views all working class men as deliberate exploiters of their wives. Dalla Costa and James argued that while working class women accept this role, the entire class and sex will be oppressed; a hefty burden for anyone to shoulder. The authors do not suggest liberating working class women to the servitude of the paid workforce is the answer. Instead, they argue for a rejection of all capitalist work, productive and reproductive, starting with working class housewives. However, Dalla Costa and James supported the Wages for Housework campaign so that working class women would no longer be the slaves of wage slaves; presumably they would become the wage slaves of capitalists or the state instead.\footnote{Tuttle, L. 1986. Encyclopaedia of Feminism. Arrow Books, London, 337; Haralambos et al, 1996, 390.}

Many opposed the idea as simply reinforcing sexual stereotypes and oppression. Seccombe was concerned that working class housewives acting alone would be insufficient to liberate the working class or women, as they were but one crucial component of the capitalist relations of production. He believed an alliance of productive and reproductive workers would be necessary to overthrow capitalism.\footnote{In Haralambos et al, 1996, 391.}

A crucial element missing from Dalla Costa and James’ treatise is the inclusion of women’s political struggles within the sphere of social reproduction. Mitchell argues, for example, miners’ wives understood their confinement to the home as a consequence of...
sexist employment practices and economic necessity. Apart from there often not being any work available for women, working class families could not survive on female wages alone. Far from being slaves to the men, they saw themselves in households and communities struggling to survive together, notwithstanding the tussles occurring within households. Two-income families are essential for family survival, as the growing incidence of the ‘working poor’ and trends in the feminisation of poverty continue to demonstrate.

At a time when more women are being drawn into the paid workforce, deprivation continues to be concentrated among working class women and their children. It has been suggested that the feminisation of work has paralleled the feminisation of poverty. For example, Chant suggests that international economic

... restructuring has caused great hardship for low-income groups and increased poverty has been linked with rising levels of female headship in this strata, often encapsulated in the concept the ‘feminisation of poverty.’

With the feminisation of work concept, Bryson argues that to depict the feminisation of poverty as a new phenomenon ‘certainly is inaccurate.’ Feminist historians have long testified to the historical experience of poverty among women. What is new is the persistence of that poverty despite international advances in female literacy and
education, life expectancy and labour force participation. The average world percentage of female to male GDP per capita stood at 55.8% in 1998.\textsuperscript{235}

The politics of wealth ownership and distribution is central to this situation.\textsuperscript{236} Increasing poverty levels amongst women must be understood within the context of a widening gap between the rich and poor generally, both between and within nations, for at least two centuries.\textsuperscript{237} Globally, around 1.2 billion people are living in absolute poverty, without the means for basic subsistence, at a time of unrivalled economic growth (approximately US$24 trillion annually).\textsuperscript{238} The United Nation’s notes:

\begin{quote}
In 1960 the [wealthiest] 20\% of the world’s people in the richest countries had 30 times the income of the poorest 20\% - in 1997, 74 times as much.\textsuperscript{239}
\end{quote}

Moreover, disparities between male and female incomes expanded during the 1980s in the majority of OECD countries including Australia. That poverty is disproportionately the lot of women and their children is intimately connected to the feminisation of work and the under-valuation of women’s labour, both in the sphere of paid employment and on the domestic front. Goldberg and Kremen’s work on the feminisation of poverty in seven industrialised countries (not including Australia) identified nine common contributing factors:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{238} Bulbeck, 1993, 298.
\item \textsuperscript{239} UNDP, 1999, 36.
\end{itemize}
... large-scale entry of women into the labor force; significant educational gains for women; emergence of the dual role for employed women; occupational concentration of women in low-wage sectors of the economy; persisting female/male earnings differentials; insufficient governmental commitment to equalization policies; insufficient publicly supported child care; irregular and insufficient paternal child support; and under-representation of women in governmental and policymaking bodies. 240

The latest feminised proletariat is simultaneously producing more of the world’s riches than ever before, yet still scraping to survive. Yet, not all women are fairing poorly in the new economic order. Research conducted by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) in 2000, found that over a fifteen year period (1982-1996/97)

...women at the top increased their salaries by 22 per cent, or $218 a week in real dollar terms, while women at the bottom actually slipped backwards by 9 per cent or $4.40 a week. 241

These figures reflect the income of women earning more than 175% of the median wage and women earning under 50% of the median. 242 They therefore do not account for unemployed women or their respective wealth levels that would likely exacerbate the gap between them. Even though women’s average earnings are growing at a faster rate than men’s, this has given little comfort to lower income women.

The specific economic difficulties working class women experience shape their outlook on interpersonal relations. If they and their children are to survive the realities of life under capitalism, the support of their menfolk is crucial. Divergent attitudes to the domestic division of labour make for volatile sexual relations within working class

240 Goldberg and Kremen, 1990, 205.
241 Hickman and Gunn, 2000, 1. The gap between men was a 12.4 per cent ($169/week) improvement for high income earners compared to a 6.3 per cent ($14 a week) improvement for low income men.
242 Hickmann and Gunn, 2000, 14.
households.\textsuperscript{243} It is perhaps unsurprising that a study reported single working class men are finding it very difficult to find a partner and are more prone to mental health problems. Birrell found these men ‘in their 20s and 30s … are destined to live their working years without a full-time job, with never enough savings to find a partner, to marry and support a family’.\textsuperscript{244}

The lower your pay, the less chance you have of getting married or partnered and the more chance there is you will be divorced or separated. More than half of all men in their late 20s and early 30s have no post-school education. … Without full-time work, those young men are living on less than $32,100 a year, with many on less than half that through the dole. … Even a single mother finds those men an unattractive prospect -- they are financially better off living alone.\textsuperscript{245}

Poverty and alienation render working class families financially vulnerable. Cooperation and support between the sexes have always been a vital element in the survival of such families.

Working class women’s labours hold working class families together and underpin the viability of middle-class families. Middle class women with unsupportive partners could buy their way out of domestic confrontation. The Pocock study found girls from higher class backgrounds were more resigned to male evasiveness of domestic work and were more likely to anticipate paying for domestic assistance in the future to avoid these conflicts.\textsuperscript{246} These expectations are predicated upon the continuing subordination of working class women as domestic workers. As Rosewarne notes, the increased entry of


\textsuperscript{244} Cited in McManus, G. 2004. "Victims of the Boom." \textit{Herald Sun}, 29\textsuperscript{th} March, 10.

\textsuperscript{245} Cited in McManus, 2004 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{246} Pocock, 2004.
women into the labour market never corresponded with the socialisation of domestic work or the proletarianisation of all women workers: ‘… the successful career development of some women, [enables] them to buy in domestic and other household responsibilities…’ Reminiscent of conditions prevailing during the pre-war systemic crisis of capitalism, working class women’s labours allow middle class women to circumvent the burdens of the privatised family under capitalism.

As Australia is reconstructed as a high wage/low wage service oriented economy with a reduced manufacturing and primary industries base, women of different classes are entering into new social relations. For example, while women’s work in domestic service is not a new phenomenon, it is an occupation many believed to be a relic of pre-war times. Concerns over ‘time poor’ women battling their way through glass ceilings, overlook the labours of working class women necessary for the maintenance of high-waged careers and lifestyles. Hickman and Gunn’s interview with a Perth-based cleaning firm catering to high income women, revealed most of the employees are women working part-time on wages of $6,000 a year. They perform ‘cleaning, gardening, shopping, ironing and cooking for career women who are time-poor.’ The manager reported: ‘most of our ladies are in the low socio-economic scale. Cleaning is not a career choice for them. Most are ethnic; they do not have other skills and their English is not good.’ The growing gap between classes of women has re-intensified

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247 Rosewarne, 2001, 131.
249 David and Wheelwright, 1989, 7; Meredith and Dyster, 1999.
the commodification of social reproduction.\textsuperscript{253} It is a reminder that the feminisation of work concept draws attention to the most recent manifestations of the age-old exploitation of working class women’s labours.

Having the choice of working or raising a family is a social privilege not extended to many working class women.\textsuperscript{254} Langston explains:

> Working-class women have seldom had the luxury of choosing between work in the home or market. We’ve generally done both, with little ability to purchase services to help with this double burden. …Working a double or triple day is common for working-class women.\textsuperscript{255}

Declining working class incomes compel most partnered women into the workforce whether they want to or not. However, inadequate childcare arrangements affected the work options of 88% of respondents to an ACTU survey.\textsuperscript{256} A reported 73% saw affordability of child care as a significant factor in their work patterns.\textsuperscript{257} In addition to the costs of childcare ($144 for two children for women earning under $500 per week), for many working class women paid employment means increased public housing costs and tax rates, and loss of discounts for travel, health and vehicle registration.\textsuperscript{258} Millward contends ‘financial security is essential for the ever increasing number of single mothers, who are often principal family breadwinners.’\textsuperscript{259}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{254} Donaldson, 1991, 66.
\textsuperscript{256} ACTU, 2004, 5.
\textsuperscript{257} ACTU, 2004, 4.
\textsuperscript{258} Horin, 2000.
\textsuperscript{259} Millward, 1996a, 16.
\end{flushleft}
The neo-liberal transformation of the Australian welfare system into a US style ‘workfare’ system carries punitive measures for working class women.\textsuperscript{260} For example, single mothers who miss a job interview or move to cheaper housing (typically in areas with correspondingly higher unemployment) are fined the equivalent of $4247.\textsuperscript{261} This is one element of the Howard government’s program for encouraging working class single mothers into the workforce. Walter’s research disputes assumptions about the impact of paid work on single mothers’ material position.\textsuperscript{262} Their usually lower education levels, extended absences from paid work and ongoing child rearing responsibilities means most are only able to find lower paid and causal employment. Rosewarne contends:

> Through the introduction of such provisions as ‘mutual obligation’ requirements, the welfare state has increasingly been refashioned as an institutional vehicle to feed the bottom end of the labour market. The construction of the ‘workfare state’ now presents a very serious obstacle to progressing the cause of economic justice.\textsuperscript{263}

Australia spends $18 billion less than the OECD average on social security entitlements, yet even this modest investment in a social safety net has become a luxury.\textsuperscript{264}

Life under the rule of capital is observable in the health and well-being of working class women. The connection between class and health has been documented since Engel’s work on the conditions of the English working class under capitalism.\textsuperscript{265} The 2002


\textsuperscript{263} Rosewarne, 2001, 134.

\textsuperscript{264} Horin, 2000.

NSW Adult Health Survey provides a rare recent overview of gender and class (using the problematic proxy of socio-economic status) health patterns including several social capital measures that have particular political importance.\textsuperscript{266}

Figure 6 sets out the positive correlation between better physical and psychological health and higher socio-economic status (Quintile 1).

**Figure 6 Selected health indicators for SES Quintile 1 and 5\textsuperscript{267}**

These class differences are discernible within the health patterns of women. Compared to high income women, low income women in NSW are more likely to suffer disability (83%), report more serious chronic illness (32%), report recent illness (25%), and report

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\textsuperscript{266} See Germov (2002) for a discussion of the difficulties with using SES as a proxy for class.

\textsuperscript{267} NSW Health, 2003.
being in only fair/poor health (148%). Age adjusted mortality or death rates, for women aged 25-64, in the lowest SES groups are 122% higher than for women in the highest SES group.

Figure 7 provides a more detailed picture of the health differentials specifically among women in NSW by socio-economic status

**Figure 7 Selected Female Health Indicators for SES Quintiles 1 and 5**

The relationship between socio-economic status and poor health is clear on a range of levels. Lower income women have more difficulty meeting food requirements and experience higher morbidity (ill-health). They have higher exposure to risk factors like diabetes and high cholesterol and are more likely to incur workplace injury. They

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consequently have worse physical and mental health and higher levels of contact with
the health care system, yet experience the most difficulty in accessing quality care. On
all of these indicators with the exception of hospital admissions (largely due to child
birth admissions) working class women’s health statistics correlated more closely with
working class men’s than that of higher SES women. Class was a stronger determinant
of health status than gender in this survey at least.

While poorer health is common to all working class people, gender differences within
the working class are noteworthy (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8 Selected gendered health indicators for SES quintile 5, NSW**

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270 Lower income women reported the most dissatisfaction with medical treatment (including dental
services) mainly due to waiting times, poor skills and attitude of clinicians and understaffing.
Men reported more work-related injuries and higher rates of diabetes. Women experienced more difficulty gaining sufficient food, higher cholesterol levels (this trend is reversed for higher SES groups), more contact and difficulties with the health care system and greater mental health problems. The physical health and nutrition of lower income women is compromised by the cost of nutritional food. Foodbank Australia distributed five million tonnes of food aid within Australia in 2003, with which it fed 20,000 working class people each day. Food insecurity and malnourishment are growing national concerns and working class women and their children are the most vulnerable; for example, 42 per cent of sole parents receiving social security, who are mostly female, live in poverty. As indicated in the following chapter, sole parents are over-represented in Campbelltown.

Needless to say, the material and social position of working class women seriously affects their emotional wellbeing as indicated. Working class women registered the highest levels of psychological or emotional suffering of all other gender and class categories, with women in the lowest quintile showing distress levels 40 per cent above the NSW average. The emotional suffering of working class women registers the reshaping of ‘capitalist societies to such an extent that considerably fewer systems exist to alleviate the harmful effects on the majority of the increasing prosperity of the minority.’


Burgmann, 2003, 331.
The emotional labour working class women perform is rarely acknowledged or analysed from a political economy perspective, yet its political ramifications are substantial.\textsuperscript{276}

Echoing Birrell’s findings above, Mugford and Lally unwittingly observed the contribution of emotional labour to class cohesion between the sexes:

\begin{quote}
In general it seems that they are better off single than married – echoing Jessie Bernhard’s conclusion that marriage is good for men but not for women. If, however, they are to get married then clearly they are better off in terms of mental health to marry a man of upper social status and to work, preferably at a high status job. If they marry a man of lower social status they are better off not working … the chances of having a good mental health adjustment if you are a woman are maximised by staying single and working, preferably at a ‘career’ type occupation. For a male, however, whilst having an upper status occupation will improve your chances of good mental health, the single best thing you can do is find some woman to marry.\textsuperscript{277}
\end{quote}

Apart from the sexist and classist overtones of such a conclusion, it does emphasise ‘care-giving work [is] the core element of domestic labour.’\textsuperscript{278} This has specific political implications for class unity. Working class women disproportionately shoulder emotional work, that is, the intimate and practical work of solidarity.

The alienation of the working classes involves far more than the appropriation and commodification of the products of their labour; it entails the starving and crushing of human and class connectedness.\textsuperscript{279} Seabrook conveys the effects of alienation from species being as experienced by working class women:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{276} Beasley, 1994.
\textsuperscript{277} Mugford and Lally cited in Russell and Schofield, 1986, 73.
\textsuperscript{278} Gardiner cited in Meagher, 2002.
\textsuperscript{279} Bryson, 1992, 251.
\end{quote}
… individuals, especially women, have absorbed, secretly, privately, unspeakable burdens of social shame, disgrace and sorrow. These, too, need to be counted, before we can make any realistic assessment of profit and loss, advantage and penalty, gain and impoverishment in our lives.\textsuperscript{280}

The booming anti-depressant industry is but one indication of the depth of social suffering and emotional paralysis endured by many working class women.\textsuperscript{281} The medicalisation, pathologising and criminalising of working class women’s experiences of social oppression is well documented.\textsuperscript{282}

Alienation through commodity fetishism has a pervasive influence in working class women lives. For example, Game and Pringle observed the commodification of ‘housework as production to housework as consumption.’\textsuperscript{283} Alongside this transformation the older sustainable ideology of sufficiency and the working class communalism that supported it have been vilified and denigrated to ensure an ever-expanding market for capital.\textsuperscript{284}


\textsuperscript{281} Moynihan, R. 1998. \textit{Too Much Medicine: The Business of Health - And It's Risk For You}. ABC Books, Sydney, 68, 115. Moynihan notes prescriptions of new antidepressants like Aropax and Prozac have grown from 5000 per year in 1990 to over 2.5 million per year in 1996. According to the NSW Health (2003, 91) approximately 30% of those experiencing high or very high psychological distress were women in the bottom two SES quintiles.


\textsuperscript{283} Game and Pringle, 1983, 120.

Multi-billion dollar marketing and advertising industries commodify women’s emotions, dealing out lethal cocktails of self-hatred and abuse.\textsuperscript{285} Berger noted ‘[t]he publicity image steals her love of herself as she is and offers it back to her for the price of a product.’\textsuperscript{286} Working class women navigate this ideological treachery not only for themselves, but also their children’s yearnings for endless commodities as badges of social worth.\textsuperscript{287} Working class women must cope with the contradiction between capital’s stimulation of endless consumerism while simultaneously being denied the means for consumption.

Data on neighbourhood ties and solidarity (or, in de-classed terms, ‘social capital’) provides another entry towards a reckoning of the class ledger. As indicated in Figure 9, the NSW Health Survey reported community interaction and perceptions converge more along class, than gender, lines. Friendship networks, as opposed to formalised group activities, are stronger among working class women and men; however, wealthier people are more likely to receive help from neighbours, which perhaps reflects the greater resources at their disposal.

\textsuperscript{287} Matthews, 1984, 82-86; Seabrook, 1990.
Figure 9 Selected Social Capital Indicators by gender and quintile, NSW, 2002

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quintile 1</th>
<th>Quintile 5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Runs into local friends</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit neighbours</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help from neighbours</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps local groups</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of local group</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended recent community event</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel safe walking outside after dark</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust people</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation of neighbourhood as safe</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would be sad to leave</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>81</td>
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</table>

Stevenson’s research of community and neighbourhood networks in Mayfield (a Newcastle suburb) indicates pace of residential change and types of tenancy affect their reproduction. A high level of help giving was noted in her study of upper working and middle class residents, as was an inclination to keep neighbours at arms length until needed.

Stevenson argues homeownership was the clearest indication of exclusion or inclusion in neighbourhood networks. Her work emphasises the role of residential status and commodity fetishism (in the form of the house) as a measure of community belonging. As she notes, the ideology of homeownership and consumerism influenced the ‘inning’ and ‘outing’ of neighbours. Nonetheless, Stevenson downplays the relevance of class factors in her work because housing tenure was the key measure of whether working

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288 NSW Health, 2003, 117-128
290 Stevenson, 1999.
class people would be included or excluded from cross-class neighbourhood networks. More convincingly, she suggests renters (who were all presumed to be working class) were excluded from networks because their connections to the community were more tenuous, noting that some longer-term renters were included. Home ownership and locational stability are deeply classed experiences though. Stevenson did not interview unemployed people or renters, so it is possible these residents had their own networks that excluded the more affluent residents. Peel’s work of working class women’s networks in suburban Elizabeth (South Australia) seems to support this possibility:

Despite rapid in-migration and the mobility of households between different parts of Elizabeth, women in more established households perpetuated these territories, usually a few streets at most. Women in mobile households would fit in, or, if everyone was new, would re-create agreed neighbourhood conventions and standards among themselves. These coalitions provided mutual aid, friendship and support.

The NSW Health study above indicates attitudes towards local areas also register strong class differences. Levels of confidence in the community run higher in more affluent areas. The contradiction within working class areas between the existence of closer networks, yet greater distrust and ambivalence about relocating, may measure the success of media propaganda on the perils of working class suburbs as well as the affects of class fragmentation. It is much easier to feel relaxed in suburbs less ruptured by

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291 Stevenson (1999) does not provide a complete class breakdown of her participants. She notes (1999, 218) a ‘high proportion’ of women ‘did not work’ (an uncommon situation for working class women) and that she did not interview any unemployed people. She does seem to have focused her research on the upper working and middle class sections of Mayfield.

292 Peel, M. 1993. Making a Place: Women in the 'Workers' City'. Urban Research Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, 23.

class inequality. The internalisation of media driven social phobias is perhaps also partially responsible for the gendered differences in perceptions of street safety.\textsuperscript{294} The spectre of the night streets is not a ruthless corporate executive, but various incarnations of the working class male. This is reinforced by ‘the stereotype of the wife basher as being “typically working class” (read arrogant, ignorant, macho, strong) [which] has been proved conclusively incorrect.’\textsuperscript{295} Nonetheless, that more than half of women and around a third of men feel unsafe in their own working class neighbourhoods, to the point that many would be unconcerned about moving, is an entrenched political problem, as much as an interpersonal one.

This examination conveys some of the structural consequences on working class women of a capital system edging towards its systemic limits.\textsuperscript{296} It conveys some of the material, political, and emotional constraints, working class women endure and at times succumb to. Meszaros argues ‘the highly stretched character of the reproduction process’ and the relatively high cost of living in advanced capitalist nations exposes the political economy to the risk of ‘a significant decline in purchasing power’ and subsequent social instability.\textsuperscript{297} These social manifestations of capital’s contradictions are clearly discernible in the exploitation and oppression of working class women.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Powell, 1993; Johnson, 1997a; Poynting, 2004.
\item Donaldson, 1991, 78.
\item Meszaros, 1995, 239-252.
\item Meszaros, 1995, 251; Burgmann, 2003, 334.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Agency and Resistance

Ferguson and other materialist feminists have criticised the overly theoretical and apolitical approach many have taken to the study of social reproduction. They have instead pursued ‘the historical materialist project of deconstructing the social relations’ that enable capitalism to operate.298 This is achieved by focusing their analyses on the people’s contextualised and lived experiences of class, gender and other social dimensions, rather than treating them as abstract concepts.

The foregoing material provides little hint of the ‘form-giving flame’ and ‘cycle of struggle’ that characterises the working class in socialist theory.299 Space permits only an emblematic glance at instances of working class women’s agency in the various arenas of struggle they inhabit; necessarily, they are moments of contradictory and partial resistance, echoing the embattlement of poor women throughout the history of capitalism.300

In contrast to contemporary studies, a not insubstantial literature exists on the historical agency of Australian working class women. Several important texts on gender and class were produced at the height of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and early 1980s.301

298 Ferguson, 1999, 4.
Amongst the recent scholarship is Damousi’s history of women’s involvement in Australian socialist and communist organisations prior to 1955; her work reinforces the message of earlier texts that working class women have always been politically active.\textsuperscript{302} McDonald and Curthoys have also contributed a recent volume on the history of the Communist Party sponsored Union of Australian Women (UAW), the only broad-based organisation involving working class women in the post-war period.\textsuperscript{303} In the Australian context, a scattering of working class women have documented their political experiences, yet their insights have been lost on feminist political theory and activism in recent decades.\textsuperscript{304} While an extensive consideration of each of these earlier works is beyond the scope of the review, some of their insights are incorporated in the following discussion of contemporary working class women’s agency.

Successive generations of working class women’s politics have been persistently represented in dismissive and paternalistic terms. Daphne Gollan, ‘a woman of the left’ whose life and radical politics spanned over half the twentieth century, hoped there would be a correction of

\begin{footnotesize}
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... the common picture of us as earnest toilers in the field kitchens of the army of labour, devoid either of broad visions of the future, or of any intimation of the specific problems of women’s oppression.\textsuperscript{305} Working class women’s activism does not fit neatly into conventional understandings of political practice. Attempts to organise and mobilise working class women using traditional union or party strategies have met with only partial success; this goal ‘was always a baffling one’ even to radical working class women themselves.\textsuperscript{306}

The UAW is notable as the only post-war organisation to specifically champion the interests of working class women and their communities over four decades.\textsuperscript{307} They campaigned on many issues including: equal pay, inflation, unemployment, peace issues, indigenous rights, environmental issues, housing and transport, aged care and children’s rights. Union members saw these issues as inter-related consequences of the exploitation of workers, the drive for capital accumulation and the machinations of the capitalist state. Their strategies were necessarily multidimensional and drew upon their experiences as consumers, workers, citizens, community members, mothers and wives. For example, their Campaign Against Rising Prices in the 1970s involved housewives and unions fighting government departments and business such Coles and Lever and Kitchen.\textsuperscript{308} ‘Much effort and enthusiasm went in trying to extend community services to provide local markets, halls and child-minding centres.’\textsuperscript{309}

\textsuperscript{306} Gollan, 1980, 326.
\textsuperscript{307} Curthoys and McDonald, 1996. Gollan (1980, 326) suggests the UAW was a ‘sedate’ replacement of its predecessor, the New Housewives Association. The political climate of the Cold War limited the scope of its organising work.
\textsuperscript{308} Curthoys and McDonald, 1996, 122.
\textsuperscript{309} Gollan, 1980, 326.
The UAW did not emerge spontaneously from the ranks of ordinary working class women; it was a socialist led organisation that benefited from and was inhibited by its association with the Communist Party of Australia.\textsuperscript{310} The resources, networks and solidarity of the CPA and left-wing unions, while not immense, were nevertheless important. The organisational skills of socialist women were also valuable. Yet, as Gollan notes the viability of the UAW ultimately relied on the support of local branches, that is, local working class women involved in local issues.\textsuperscript{311} The observation underscores the importance of examining the local political economy of working class women within the context of broader structural processes.

The adherence of communist women to Party policy over UAW activities did present problems. Gollan recalls:

\begin{quote}
…we could rarely resist the temptation to raise the work to a higher level by putting on demonstrations against rising prices, milling about in the gas company’s offices, for example, waving our gas bills. We were urged, all thirty of the most advanced of us, by a member of the Central Committee, to storm Parliament House with our grievances. … What was wrong about all this was not the policy of publicity-seeking in itself … but the suggestion that such stunts had anything in common with the acts of mass indignation coming out of class battles.\textsuperscript{312}
\end{quote}

Curthoys and McDonald confirm the alienating tendency of some ‘provocative actions’ and the ‘close association with the actions of left-wing unions’, which they attributed to an ‘overestimation of the general militancy of the working class’.\textsuperscript{313} Hartley and Parsons work on a women’s liberation group in Diamond Valley offered an external perspective on the UAW’s actions. They noted ‘UAW members had generally discussed ‘political’

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[310]{Gollan, 1980, 326.}
\footnotetext[311]{Gollan, 1980, 326; Curthoys and McDonald, 1996, 4.}
\footnotetext[312]{Gollan, 1980, 326-327.}
\footnotetext[313]{Curthoys and McDonald, 1996, 6.}
\end{footnotes}
issues such as child care but never on a very personal level’ and that they complained ‘the local group was too inward-looking and not sufficiently ready to act.’\textsuperscript{314} Better than any other organisation the UAW was able to connect with the undercurrent of working class women’s politics, however it also echoed the tensions and political distance between the CPA and the Australian working class.

Notwithstanding tactical problems within the UAW, there were numerous reasons for its eventual demise. These included: the increasing shortage of volunteers as working class women entered the workforce in larger numbers; the scattering and isolation of working class women and their networks across the western suburbs; the anti-male, anti-union stance of powerful sections of the women’s liberation movement; the political antipathy towards communist organisation during the Cold War; the disarray of the Left from the 1980s; and the emergence of various issue-specific women’s organisations that seemed to reduce the saliency of a broad-based organisation at the time.\textsuperscript{315} Moreover, the young middle-class women in the women’s liberation movement found little common ground with ageing working class stalwarts of the UAW in later years. For all its confessed shortcomings, the UAW was rare in taking long-term serious interest in working class women’s concerns and in actively fighting for the realisation of immediate improvements in their lives.


\textsuperscript{315} Allport, 1984; Powell, 1993; Curthoys and McDonald, 1996, 165-166.
Lesser known small-scale groups of working class women have emerged spontaneously from the sufferings of daily life. For instance, Client Power, a group of low income Aboriginal women and supportive welfare students, challenged the arbitrary and invasive administration of financial assistance to single parents by the Department of Children’s Services in Queensland. Tomlinson’s observations about why working class women were initially reluctant to become involved are instructive: there was anxiety about the stigma of single motherhood that might follow from identifying as such; disinterest in what appeared to be a helpless group, that is, ‘uniting in weakness’; and perceptions of the department as an impenetrable fortress. Nonetheless the core group persisted with their planning and articulating their grievances and demands. As the group developed and began lobbying and actions, such as a sit-in by mothers, their children, and students, support began to grow.

Eventually Client Power was instrumental in encouraging uniform payments and procedural fairness in government assistance. The social work profession, its association and most academics, all succoured by the state, either turned a blind eye or actively opposed Client Power’s struggle with the government. Tomlinson argues the need for a united front is more urgent in the current era of mutual obligation and a ‘compelled conservative compact.’ How the social divisions hewn by the state are to be overcome in order to extract anything more than minor concessions from it (as important to daily life as they are) is less obvious.

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Evidence of working class women’s political activism in recent times is much harder to discover. The major metropolitan and regional newspapers contain barely a whisper of working class women’s existence, let alone their political activity. Yet it is possible to glimpse their shadow in all manner of contexts. In Bankstown, Blacktown, Penrith and other suburbs women have been involved in ‘Reclaim the Train’ protests in conjunction with the annual Reclaim the Night march.318 In Campbelltown, mainly lower income women with children with disabilities formed themselves into grassroots group, Families in Partnership, to lobby for services and greater accountability in the provision of entitlements from the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care and Centrelink.319 In the same region, working class women and men formed the Minto Residents Action Group to battle the Department of Housing over its handling of the demolition of their homes and relocation planning.320 Far away in Northern Australia, a dry cleaning worker, Yvonne Margarula, is senior traditional owner of Mirrar country in the Kakadu region and has led the struggle against uranium mining at Jabiluka.321 These scattered examples hint at a subterranean realm of resistance spontaneously ebbing and flowing in response to the immediate threats to people’s survival and in defiance of the authorities that seek to control their worlds. They typically spring forth from specific local conditions where women are able to retain control over the form and content of resistance even though they may seek external support. A systematic and contextualised

engagement with this amorphous and mercurial domain of activism, where political life and everyday life merge, has yet to be undertaken in Australia.  

By comparison, the history of women’s activism in the workplace has been better documented. With the exception of the war years, female unionisation has rarely matched male unionisation rates.  

Forrest questions conventional interpretations of this outcome: ‘From the “fact” of women’s historically lower rates of union membership was deduced the “theory” of women’s lower propensity to unionize.’  

These views overlook the previously discussed structural barriers to women’s unionisation and the disparate occasions of women’s high unionisation rates.

In the United States, Cobble advanced the argument that ‘working class feminists “bore the torch of gender inequality and justice in the 1940s and 50s” as middle-class traditions of equal rights feminism went into hibernation…’  

There is evidence of such a response in Australia. The unique social and industrial circumstance of full employment provided by the war economy, enabled women workers during the Second World War, for example, to build 80 percent unionisation rate amongst NSW female

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324 Forrest, 2000, 47.

clothing workers in 1944/45 and a spate of militant actions. This occurred in spite of male union officials’ condemnation and condescension, ALP obstructions, and opposition from conservative women’s organisations. Greenwood notes the ongoing lack of solidarity from the union movement:

… women have never been out of the workforce … women have always agitated for a share of their ‘place in the sun.’ The LWU strike … is another example of the refusal by strong, male-dominated unions to recognise women’s historical role.

Notwithstanding such obfuscation, the power of working class women has been central to the position of labour and union movements.

Recent investigations of the connections between labour movements and working class communities by labour historians have rediscovered the centrality of working class women’s politics. Faue, for example, notes

… the important role of working class women in creating and sustaining the material and affective bonds of community and the evolution of class and community solidarities. How well working class women were incorporated into the class politics of these small communities had an important impact on the success or failure of class politics and the possibility of sustaining working class interests in the wider community. … Where women were excluded,
the politics of class suffered … where women were incorporated in labour organisation, however they often succeeded where men failed…  

The emphasis on working class women’s containment to the private sphere contributed to the necessary politicisation of personal issues. However, this now entrenched orthodoxy has obscured serious consideration of working class women’s political agency and the ways in which they subvert that containment in contemporary contexts. Meyerowitz argues the deliberate construction of working class women’s isolation in the domestic realm is ‘intended to make female political passivity the norm.’

The initial physical isolation of working class women in the suburbs was a tangible illustration of how the state saw their position in society after the Second World War. Mary Ryan, a Commonwealth Housing Commissioner, believed ‘one way to make mothers more reconciled to remaining at their posts’ was to develop ‘streamlined modern homes’ across the suburbs. Ryan could not understand why many working class women wanted to stay in their ‘wretched hovels’; she failed to grasp the importance of their ‘local network for friendship, support and short-term financing of household expenditure.’

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331 Frankel, 1992, 221.
334 Allport, 1984, 144.
Suburbanisation moved working class women out of reach of jobs and public services. It inhibited regular contact with friends and reduced the time husbands and wives spent with each other and their children. The confinement of working class women to the city’s outer precincts severely undermined the potential for collective action and solidarity for many, forcing them to battle alone or turn to state services and all the invasiveness that involves. Watson highlights these gendered impacts of suburbanisation.\textsuperscript{335} This process was an extension of capitalism’s tendency to break down ‘the household as a productive unit, separating domestic labour from “productive” wage labour.’\textsuperscript{336} It emphasises the class politics of physical geography often missed in macro political economy studies.\textsuperscript{337}

For those who seek to subordinate labour, the political advantages of fragmenting working class life and solidarity is amply illustrated by the notable militancy of working class communities where home and working life have not been so easily fractured. Mining communities feature often in industrial and labour history, for example.\textsuperscript{338} As Mitchell notes, the pervasive control exerted by mining companies over every aspect of local life contributed to ‘the spontaneous response of people who belonged in a

\textsuperscript{336} Townsend, 1996, 214.
community that always seemed in a state of siege.’\textsuperscript{339} Frankel has noted the social peculiarity of mining communities and other ‘one company towns’.\textsuperscript{340}

Notwithstanding the strategic nature of the industry, in these towns the separation of work and home that characterizes employment in most other industries is essentially reversed in mining communities.\textsuperscript{341} In these settings one company owned and controlled, not only the paid workforce, but also the housing, shops and community services – the company had an omniscient presence in the lives of mining families, meaning that ‘battles in the workplace radiated through the community as a whole.’\textsuperscript{342} Grace Scanlon, for example, remembered in 1939

\begin{quote}
The auxiliaries weren’t just for miners’ wives and their womenfolk – our constitution took in any woman on the coalfields. … The coal-mines were the hub of the whole community, so if the mines were out or there was a reduction in wages, everyone in Cessnock was affected. … I doubt the men would have been able to stay out as long as they did … if it hadn’t been for the work of the auxiliaries … helping with soup kitchens and relief … We were all housewives and scrounging along on the same money.\textsuperscript{343}
\end{quote}

The interconnection of all spheres of life through the overwhelming control of the company provided cause and scope for working class women’s radicalism.

These community disputes echo historical conflicts between mining capital and labour at Bulli in the late nineteenth century. When strike action erupted over wage cuts, mine safety or in defence of unionism, wives ‘would not sit back in idle patience while their

\begin{footnotes}
\item[339] Mitchell, 1980, 166.
\item[342] Frankel, 1992, 31.
\item[343] Cited in Stevens, 1987, 116.
\end{footnotes}
husbands, fathers and sons did the men’s work of defending the homes and livelihoods of the families.\textsuperscript{344} Apart from making do with loss of wages and resisting evictions, these working class women convinced non-union labour to walk away from the decimation of their communities. When armed forces were brought in to suppress the strikers, women and children were sent to negotiate with the mine-owners.

On occasion women were imprisoned for their efforts, more often they were beaten by the combined might of capital and the state. Moreover, the separation between work and home life was less distinct in these ‘occupational’ communities, meaning working class women’s labours were more visible in this particularly dangerous industry. Mitchell’s account challenged views of ‘these women merely as weepers or as passive bearers of hardship’; the conditions of their existence drove their politics.\textsuperscript{345} It also highlights that union membership has not always been a prerequisite for industrial activism on the part of working class women. Yet, from these desperate times grew the women’s auxiliaries, so well known for their untiring and crucial role in mining disputes throughout the years.\textsuperscript{346}

Bloodworth provides a similar account of the role of working class women in the Broken Hill mining disputes several decades later.\textsuperscript{347} Her investigation reveals the centrality of their participation in the struggle against mine owners by mobilising their social reproduction work against capital directly. Working class women took part in

\textsuperscript{344} Mitchell, 1980, 166.
\textsuperscript{345} Mitchell, 1980, 157.
\textsuperscript{346} Mitchell, 1975; Mitchell, 1980; Stevens, 1987.
\textsuperscript{347} Bloodworth, 1998.
traditionally core activities of marches, picket lines, meetings and speeches and sometimes led rallies to protect their men from violence and arrest. Bloodworth outlines the crucial place of women’s auxiliaries and support activities to the main thrust of the campaign. Male activists viewed as central to their political objectives, not peripheral, women’s organising of free concerts, fundraising and cultural components of political meetings, and socialist Sunday Schools. Men often worked alongside women in these activities or minded children whilst their wives undertook them. Bloodworth suggests the significance of these activities has been retrospectively devalued because of a waning appreciation of the vital interrelationship between working class politics and cultural expression.

348 Mitchell (1975) also noted the practice of women and children leading demonstrations with the tactic of employing stereotypes about their frailty and weakness to deflect police violence or to emotionally pressure scab labour to quit.
350 Campbell, B. 1987. The Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory? Virago, London; Ferrier, C. 1986. Point of Departure: The Autobiography of Jean Devanny. University of Queensland Press, Brisbane. Not all women enjoyed this level of support and solidarity in their political activities. For example see the biographies of wives of left-wing or union activists, such as, Zelda D’Aprano (1978), Jean Devanny (Ferrier, 1986) and Amirah Inglis (1995). Women involved in the Union of Australian Women re-tell how their political activities often came a poor third, behind family duties and their husband’s activities (Curthoys and McDonald, 1996). Further, Beatrix Campbell’s (1987) investigation of conservative women in Britain reveals the ideological underpinnings of their willingness to play subservient roles behind the scenes of male-dominated conservative politics.
351 Bloodworth, 1998, 33. Also: Radic, T. 1989. Songs of Australian Working Life. Greenhouse Publications, Elwood, Vic; National Folk Festival (NFF). 2004. "Sponsors and Partners" [Web Page]. Accessed 23rd September, 2004 at: www.folkfestival.asn.au/pages/sponsors.html; The link between working class cultural activities and politics has yet to be fully documented. The essence of this connection is conveyed in working class songbooks such as Radic (1989). The connection is also evident within the Australian folk music movement, for example (Frankel, 1992, 32). The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union remains a major official sponsor of the annual National Folk Festival to this day (NFF, 2004). Many musicians still ply their craft at picket lines and demonstrations and this was a noteworthy feature of the MUA dispute. Frankel offers a brief critique of ALP and CPA attempts to foster a radical working class culture or ‘people’s culture’ (1992, 21-57). He points out that the narrow definition of the working class as waged workers and the cross-class conception of ‘the people’ overlooked crucial areas of working class ‘daily life in the home, in the street and community’ and therefore failed to convey a cultural realm that spoke to the diverse sections of the Australian working class. According to Frankel (1992, 38) ‘the tragedy is that because of the narrow equation of “working class culture” with only the labour process … most Australian working-class people have never seen a radical working-class culture which comprehensively embraced a coherent set of social and environmental issues outside the workplace.’
Recognising the household and community power of working class women, the Broken Hill miners unions appealed to them to ‘persuade their husbands, fathers, brothers, and all male relations to join, and [they] should see that they keep good on the books’. Working class women were also the only physical support base unions could call on in isolated worksites. Moreover, rank and file miners have been able to rely on their support, compared to the vagaries of the union hierarchy. This is not of course the case in all mining communities or at all times. Gibson-Graham’s and Collis’ portraits of modern mining communities convey the deep class divisions driven by oppressive sexual relations.

Nonetheless, in particular circumstances, the importance of political alliances across the spheres of production and reproduction has been demonstrated, as in the more recent case of nurses. Nurses unions have been amongst the most militant campaigners in the past several decades. Beginning with the protracted 1986 nurses’ strike, the predominantly female workers in this industry have continued to defy the political blackmail of ‘essential services’ designation.

Nurses have also managed to attract considerable public support in part because of the intimate relationship they often develop with their ‘clients’ and the communities in which they live and work. For example, in a nurse’s strike in Tottenham (NSW), the interests of residents, small business owners, workers and nurses coalesced around the

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issue of diminishing local health services.\textsuperscript{355} In this case, the majority of the townspeople joined forces with the nurses to oppose understaffing at the local hospital. Moreover, the Queensland Nurses Union defied the trend of plummeting union membership by attracting over 3000 new members in 2002. In doing so they demonstrated the current hostile political economic climate did not inevitably spell the end of worker collectivism.\textsuperscript{356}

Few urban working class communities today involve such close connections between home and working life. Spouses are not implored to support their partner’s unionism. Women workers have been involved in drawn out and isolated campaigns as previously discussed. This industrial landscape has generated different strategies that nonetheless still draw on the principles of alliance building. Geography is a vital element in class politics.

The female-dominated Financial Sector Union adopted strategies of building public support for their membership by drawing on the common grievances workers and consumers have with the capitalist state. The Financial Sector Union appears to have come some way since Manning’s scathing assessment of its predecessors for lagging… behind in initiating action aimed at swiftly improving their female members’ access to the sources of union power. … it is clear that the newly created FSU must overturn its traditional political culture of hostility to women unionists, and more recently, an absence of empathy as to their demands.\textsuperscript{357}

\textsuperscript{355} Burgmann, 2003, 275.
\textsuperscript{356} Cooper, 2003, 206-207. In the same year, inroads were made by the Community and Public Sector Union to organise predominantly female call centre workers.
\textsuperscript{357} Manning, 1994, 43. The FSU predecessors were the Australian Banking Employees’ Union and the Australian Insurance Employees’ Union.
In its defence of workers rights and conditions, for example, the FSU has forged an alliance with community groups aggrieved in different ways by the banks cost-cutting and branch closures. The Pensioners and Superannuants Federation and the Australian Consumers Association joined the coalition to push for greater staff levels, reduced branch closures and improved customer service, which the Union included in its log of claims in return for support of their industrial case. Though this case demonstrates community support for workers it remains to be seen whether the union is willing to channel it into a major challenge against the deterioration of labour conditions in the industry.

Nonetheless, this mobilisation involved the strategic identification of and activism around the inherent contradiction between capital’s need to reduce wages while increasing sales. Conventionally, this tension has been used as a mechanism of social division by pitting workers claims against inconvenienced consumers or the generalised public who would ultimately pay for wage rises through inflation. In this action the old divide and rule tactics were overcome. Railway unions have also sought to short-circuit these attacks through fare-free days on public transport during industrial disputes. These positive approaches attempt to overcome the fragmentation of labour into producers and consumers.

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The Clothing and Allied Trades Union of Australia is employing similar principles to address the re-emergence of sweated outwork in their industry. As indicated above, there are estimated to be 300,000 outworkers in this industry alone.  

Mainly working class migrant women, outworkers labour well over 40 hours a week on piece rates earning between $2 and $5 per hour. Outworkers typically have no other work prospects due to the structure of the labour market, unemployment and institutionalised racism. This is largely an underground economy of unorganised sweated labourers that are difficult for both state authorities and unions to access. An obstacle to organising the labour force is the risk of worsening the livelihoods of workers by triggering mass layoffs and capital flight. It was in response to this complex situation that the Fair Wear campaign was launched by an alliance of concerned consumer and union groups. The campaign targets retailers and legal manufacturers with positive or negative publicity to compel them to ensure their supply chains, mainly through subcontracted networks, are free from sweated labour.

Fair Wear is modeled on the international Clean Clothes campaign and has met with some success in raising public awareness of sweated labour in Australia and in changing the supply behaviour of some manufacturers and retailers. There is no evidence at this stage, however, that the size or conditions of the outworking labour force have improved. This example of the entrapment of many working class women in the black economy is a reminder of the partiality of official labour force data and political

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361 CWWCL, 1986; Tate, 1994a; Tate, 1994b; Perry, A. 1994. Report on “The Healthy Working Women Project”: a Women’s Health Programme Targeting Female Factory Workers and Outworkers in the Fairfield Local Government Area. Women’s Health in Industry, Lidcome, NSW.
economic analyses that rely solely upon them; a political economy of working class women must reconnect the various sites of labour they inhabit.\textsuperscript{363}

These instances convey a belated and perhaps tokenistic revisitation of long forgotten and denigrated forms of unionism. Consideration of alternative forms of organising and solidarity has to some extent been forced upon the movement by an industrial relations regime that outlaws secondary and general strikes, in effect criminalising workers who take industrial action in support of fellow workers in other industries.\textsuperscript{364} In a social context where industrial solidarity has been essentially outlawed, workers other roles of consumer and community member, for example, perhaps assume greater political value.\textsuperscript{365}

Capitalism has prospered from the fragmentation of working class communities, yet this is not an inevitable or irreversible process. This same splintering offers strategic intersections from which alternative class resistances can be organised. Moreover, as Burgmann notes:

Each capitalist restructuring must recruit new and different types of labour, and thus yield the possibility of working-class recomposition, involving different strata of workers with fresh capacities of resistance and counter-initiative. … The leading role of certain sectors of labor, of particular organizational strategies or specific cultural forms may decline, become archaic and be surpassed…\textsuperscript{366}

\textsuperscript{363} Tate, 1994b.
\textsuperscript{364} Cook, 2003.
\textsuperscript{366} Burgmann, 2003, 333.
As the foregoing consideration of women, employment and unionism indicates, working class women have become a crucial stratum in the restructuring of the labour market and have indeed brought with them a distinct political understanding. One study of gendered union perspectives, for example, concluded that

> Among men, trade union consciousness remained essentially economistic and narrowly focused, while women were interested in and more prepared to discuss ‘way of life’ issues, stressing ways of improving human relationships, helping each other and taking care of one’s health. … Women … thought about how their working lives might help them with the most urgent problems of their private, everyday lives. … The women drew no mechanical distinctions between their working and their private lives.\(^{367}\)

In recent decades, men have been more effectively located in one arena of material life, while women have retained closer involvement in both multiple spheres by ‘virtue’ of their multiple work sites.

Some have argued this structural burden may well have bestowed upon working class women the distinct ability to navigate and manipulate some of the loopholes and contradictions of capitalism and to subvert and counteract its worst excesses. Bryson suggests ‘the centrality of domestic labour to capitalism is related to the kinds of political action that might be taken by women … the home itself can be seen as a site of anti-capitalist struggle.’\(^{368}\) Hartmann had also argued the sexual division of labour meant women understood ‘human interdependence’ and therefore the goals of socialism, better than men.\(^{369}\)


\(^{368}\) Bryson, 1992, 238.

\(^{369}\) In Townsend, 1996, 217.
Though organised struggle at the point of production and institutionalised politics are important to understand, most working class women are not directly involved in either. Their absence from these industrial arenas has often been interpreted as a sign of their impotence. The traditional view of working class women contained, for example, in Komarovsky’s *Blue-collar Marriage* and Rainwater, Coleman and Handel’s *Workingman’s Wife* pictures them as home-centred, socially isolated, dependent, passive, attention seeking, inherently unsatisfied with life, especially discontent with marriage, and consequently political irrelevant.\(^\text{370}\) According to one study ‘the wives of unskilled workers are perhaps the most deprived of all women.’\(^\text{371}\) Johnson argues the notion of the unenlightened housewife as someone ‘who needs to be rescued, liberated or left behind’ has been based on an over-simplification of the contradictions and paradoxes of social life.\(^\text{372}\) The idea that women can achieve personal liberation and fulfillment in the context of social inequality is central to these assumptions. Too often portrayals of working class women are decontextualised interpretations that misunderstand or misrepresent the politics of everyday life and survival.

Myth-making around working class women’s politics at the behest of capital and the state has a long history. For example, in her study of representations of working class women’s identity in the United States (1930s-1945), Ellis found literary productions were manufactured, often at the state’s request, from white middle-class perspectives.\(^\text{373}\)

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\(^\text{370}\) Komarovsky (1962) and Rainwater, Coleman and Handel (1959) cited in McCourt, 1977, 18.
\(^\text{371}\) McCourt, 1977, 21.
\(^\text{372}\) Johnson, 2000, 237.
\(^\text{373}\) Cited in Ellis, 1998, 1.
They tended to simplify, homogenise, romanticise and ignore the complexities of working class life, particularly the ways in which gender and race fused with class experience. Skeggs similarly observed in her study of English working class women that images of them often reflected the ‘fear, desire and projection’, rather than ‘knowledge and understanding’, of non-working class image makers.\(^{374}\)

Some of the depictions Ellis considered were images of working class women defiant or inspirational in their opposition to gendered, and infrequently racial oppression; yet none of the images projected working class women’s resistances to material inequality and capitalism. Ellis explains the treatment of her ‘silent witnesses’ (that is, the visibility of the working class was ‘dependent on their silence’, and on interpretations by and for the middle-classes) as indicative of a society and culture where the existence of the working class is ‘America’s dirty little secret’.\(^{375}\) The state’s imperative to minimise the political and moral significance of material inequality, denied working class people a voice, particularly on the question of class. Ellis’ research is aimed at redressing this class-cultural imperialism by following in Olsen’s quest to ‘reveal how working-class people have been misrepresented, manipulated, and silenced in order to fit the expectations of a middle-class audience’ and the capitalist state.\(^{376}\)

A crucial aspect of Ellis’ work was to disentangle ‘working-class female identities from the middle-class perspectives that defined them.’\(^{377}\) In Ellis’ view, middle-class feminist

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\(^{375}\) Fussell cited in Ellis, 1998, 1.

\(^{376}\) Ellis, 1998, 11.

\(^{377}\) Ellis, 1998, 15.
analyses have tended to over-emphasise gendered and racial dimensions of working class women’s lives. She questions the accuracy of these representations by asking: ‘why materially deprived people so value their gender, race and ethnic differences over their economic similarities?’ Ellis’ argument is that materially privileged cultural producers can safely investigate ‘aspects’ of working class identity ‘while deriding its whole.’

Walkerdine and Lucey argue such constructions of working class women had them overlooked in political analyses or dismissed as ‘a conservative force’ on their husband’s collectivist inclinations. Closer historical examinations of the alleged conservatism of working class convey different understandings. An early twentieth century Seattle-based study of consumer organising is illustrative. According to Frank

…organizing ‘at the point of consumption’- through cooperatives, boycotts, labor-owned businesses, and union label and shop-card campaigns-has been inseparable from organizing ‘at the point of production’ in all periods of U.S. history… Mobilizing unionists to wield their power at the marketplace as well as at the workplace, to ‘shop union,’ …has long been an integral part of labor organization, despite historians’ tendency to overlook it.

Contrary to expectation, Frank found male unionists were the driving force behind the consumer campaigns, while women (working or not) were unsupportive. At first glance, this may appear a reactionary stance, yet the women involved did not object in principal to consumer strategies. In this context the practice involved a further burden on their unpaid labour as the primary household consumers in terms of time and money – in

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380 Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989, 86.
381 Cited in Cohen, 1996, 106.
other words, it entailed a ‘speed up’ of their already stretched labours. These women were however committed to other militant union campaigns, but found ‘politics at the point of consumption came too much at their own expense.’ In other contexts of course, working class women have been at the forefront of consumer struggles. Too often working class women have been dismissed as conservative and ignorant without any attempt to understand the material and emotional substance of their politics.

Working class women are often not in a social position to pursue political strategies set by others, and few sections of the population beyond their immediate networks have been prepared to offer them any assistance on their own terms. For working class women the mundane tribulations of everyday life are their political battleground. McCourt states:

The energies of many working-class women are absorbed in struggling for decent housing and food for their families and decent education for their children, and in trying to reconcile the contradictions of a capitalist system that demands consumption of unnecessary goods while making the attainment of life’s necessities – health care, clothes that last, food without harmful side effects – increasingly problematic. But this behaviour has not been defined as political. Outsiders once described working class women as being dragged into the depressing ‘petty gossip and aimless frustration of suburban life’, a condition some termed ‘suburban neurosis.’ Tebbutt has more perceptively explained gossip as a vital

384 McCourt, 1977, 5.
385 Allport, 1984, 139.
element in the reproduction of solidarity among working class women in particular localities as they confront the alienation and impoverishment of life under capitalism.  

Others have recognised the vital role working class women perform as bearers of collective memory and solidarity. Seccombe and Livingstone note the broader significance of these networks in working class reproduction.

Enduring forms of group membership and solidarity are often sustained for decades and centuries by feelings of kinship, an awareness of common heritage and shared history passed down … Collective memory is constantly being refreshed by story-telling, flag-waving, songs, anniversary remembrances, and the display of badges of group identity. Climactic struggles and historic turning points, long ago, become the reference points of heroic myth. Even when they have long been in recession and seem to be forgotten, collective memories will be suddenly rediscovered with the revival of an impulse to group action.

Their devalued communication has for centuries served as a conduit for counter-hegemonic ideas and a spur to insubordination and insurrection. This social reproduction work is specifically directed to the survival and maintenance of the class against capital, though not without contradiction and conflict.

Often it is only other working class women – mothers, sisters, grandmothers and friends – who share and support them in these struggles. Donaldson notes, for example, the essential role of extended family, particularly grandmothers, in childcare provision for...

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388 Rowbotham, 1974.
working class women unable to afford or access public services. Millward’s research also found women in outer urban suburbs (including Campbelltown) were much more likely to rely on informal networks, especially grandparents, than inner urban women. She noted women in outer urban areas using informal care were more likely than women in other areas to have been offered childcare assistance through their networks and were more concerned about their children being cared for in a familiar place by familiar people.

Donaldson explains further how the various aspects of working class women’s lives reverberate through each other:

Most seem both unable and unwilling to separate home and work as two distinct worlds, since they necessarily and simultaneously inhabit both and see their paid work and family lives as a continuum … Home and paid workplace are one and the same world centrally brought together in the persons of workers who are daughters, wives and mothers, in the coincidence of the relations of production and reproduction.

These interconnected experiences of daily life generate a distinctive political understanding. Working class women’s social reproduction networks form the basis of class solidarities imbued with a sharp political astuteness stemming from their constant experiences of institutional and interpersonal classism, sexism and in many cases racism. Accordingly, working class women are generally distrustful of the political system, wise to the crookedness of police and politicians and antagonistic towards state institutions.

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390 Donaldson, 1996, 42.
391 Millward, 1996a, 13.
394 McCourt, 1977, 18.
Their social vantage point reveals a distinct perspective of the capitalist political economy and its many contradictions, and simultaneously exposes points of resistance less apparent to other social groups.

The vibrancy of working class women’s networks has been captured in numerous studies.\footnote{Rowbotham, S., Segal, L. and Wainright, H. (eds.). 1979. \textit{Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism}. Merlin, London; Campbell, 1984; Bell, D. 1988. \textit{Generations: Grandmothers, Mothers and Daughters}. McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Ringwood, Vic; Stevens, 1989; Stevenson, 1999.} Campbell’s exploration of power and poverty in 1980s Britain revealed creatively intelligent working class women dealing with deprivation and despair. Working class women’s traditions of cooperativism and mutual aid were readily observable in her work. Contrary to conventional opinion, Donaldson suggests:

\ldots the politics of social reproduction are not in fact so limited or limiting. These networks are part of ‘community control’, for working-class women are drawn into politics in many ways, one of which is through issues that threaten the network’s stability and survival.\footnote{Donaldson, 1991, 44.}

The politics of survival, of trying to reclaim the material and social resources the working class produce, necessarily involves de-fetishising the products of their labour and hence resisting the alienating control of capital.

Yet, working class women’s networks are not unassailable or without their difficulties. When Tebbutt highlights the power of women’s words to protect working class communities, this same power has also been used to exclude newcomers, foreigners and many ‘others’ of the working class.\footnote{Tebbutt, 1995.} Seabrook’s biographical sketches of life in working class England capture the familiarity, rituals and customs, and protection and
mutual support that working class networks often provided to their own. Alongside this, he depicts the destructive potential of such communities, especially in the face of non-conformity, and the clinging to tradition as a radical conservatism in an era of unprecedented social change and insecurity.\textsuperscript{398} Seabrook sees the diminution and stunting of working class life in terms of the class crimes of alienation and impoverishment (materially and spiritually). While many working class women are energised by networks of solidarity, many more battle alone. The pain of isolation, exclusion or ostracism, manifested for example in the stigma of single motherhood or women with disabled children, is perhaps most acute when endured within view of unextended solidarity networks.\textsuperscript{399}

The debilitation and desolation experienced by many working class women, where others have survived, is a crucial political question. Notwithstanding the efforts of working class women to hold their homes and communities together, disorganisation, isolation and atomisation does partially characterise the experiences of many working class households.\textsuperscript{400} One writer suggested ‘there is nothing “collective” about [the working-class woman]; she is basically unorganized, a central quality of her life.’\textsuperscript{401}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{399} Knox, M. T., Parmenter, N., Atkinson, B., Kearney, D., Mattock, M. and Yazbeck, M. 1995. \emph{If Only They Would Listen To Us: The Needs of Families Living in the Macarthur Area Who Have a Child With a Disability - The Viewpoints of Family Members}. Unit for Community Integration Studies, School of Education, Macquarie University, Sydney.
\item \textsuperscript{400} Bulbeck, C. 1998. "Conference Reports: The 7th Australian Women's Studies Association Conference, Adelaide, 16-18 April, 1998." \emph{Australian Feminist Studies}, 28, 13, 340-341. Bulbeck’s review of papers at the 7\textsuperscript{th} Australian Women’s Studies Association Conference highlights conclusions from Walkerdine and Lucey’s research. They found that in contrast to middle-class girls, young pregnant working-class girls were more likely ‘to keep their babies to avoid leaving their working-class environment.’ They explain this in terms of the class mobility pressures on young working class people by the education system. Though most are ‘failed’ by the system, they are encouraged to measure educational, career and personal
\end{itemize}
This assumption is premised on a narrow conception of politics and an underestimation of the toll social alienation and oppression exert on emotional, as much as material, well-being. Walker illustrates the systematic classism and sexism working class girls experience at the hands of the education system for example. One student who had been sexually harassed by a teacher (who went undisciplined) conveyed the oppressive circumstances of her education:

> They don’t push the posh kids outside, ‘cause you don’t learn nothin’ outside and the school would get in trouble if the posh kids didn’t learn… But they don’t teach me and I can’t write and I can’t read much. I can’t write! It’s not fair.

The demoralisation did not however prevent these girls from resisting teacher, school or parental authority. Nonetheless, working class women encounter few social environments that nurture their belief in themselves, let alone that ‘they can effect change on either the national or the local political scene.’ As Freire noted: ‘It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves.’ Poor self-esteem is an intrinsic aspect of many working class women’s life experiences, particularly of those isolated from support networks; it is a product of the institutionalised oppression they are continually subjected to.
The boundless demands on working class women’s limited emotional resources means they too, as much as time and money, must be rationed.\textsuperscript{407} Solidarity can often only be afforded where there is some prospect of reciprocity; struggles can often only be waged where there is some prospect of success. Walker and Collis examine the continual emotional, and at times physical, struggle for equality between working class women and men that class pressures exacerbate.\textsuperscript{408} They argue working class women possess a litany of resistances and long-term strategies to get men to reciprocate and share the burdens of working class life.

Based on interviews with miners’ wives, Collis suggests women in ‘relationships with the greatest power differentials (either economic or physical) may use a wider variety of strategies.’\textsuperscript{409} The material and emotional position of working class women vis a vis their menfolk has a dramatic influence on the strategies open to them in their bid for equality. She refers to Howard et. al.’s typology of women’s resistance strategies to their husband’s dominance including:

\begin{itemize}
\item manipulation (dropping hints, flattering, behaving seductively, reminding of past favours) and supplication (pleading, crying, acting ill or helpless) \item autocracy (insisting, claiming greater knowledge, asserting authority) \item disengagement (sulking, leaving the scene, trying to make the partner feel guilty) \item bargaining (reasoning, offering to compromise, offering a trade-off).
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{408} Walker, 1989, 240-264.
\textsuperscript{409} Collis, 1999, 62.
\textsuperscript{410} Collis, 1999, 63.
Men were however more inclined to disengagement, autocracy and bullying (making threats, insulting, becoming violent, ridiculing) than women. Walker noted several other more punishing tactics employed by working class women including the withdrawal of intimacy and public shaming.\textsuperscript{411} Moore noted

\begin{quote}
... in almost all societies, women have strategies for resistance ... Women often choose oblique strategies of ‘everyday forms of resistance’. Examples are spirit possession when a husband takes a second wife, or when wives desire attention or gifts; refusal to cook, have sexual intercourse, withdrawing domestic or agricultural labour, gossipping about spouses.\textsuperscript{412}
\end{quote}

Donaldson describes a wife’s efforts to encourage her husband to take a greater share of domestic work by reinforcing his natural culinary flair and using his greater access to the family car as a means for getting him to do more bill-paying and shopping. However, ‘this is creating some havoc with the household budget since Umit’s shopping skills remain rudimentary.’\textsuperscript{413}

Collis found women modified their own behaviours to cope with uncooperative husbands. For some, often those excluded from support networks, this took a self-destructive and isolated course. For other’s it manifested in collective revelry such as girl’s nights out and pub runs.\textsuperscript{414} In another time, consciousness-raising groups were a direct response to the fragmentation and isolation of women and their communities and an attempt to re-inform themselves, create alternative sources of knowledge and as an outlet for ‘speaking bitterness’, particularly around domestic relations.\textsuperscript{415} Though middle

\textsuperscript{411} Walker, 1989, 240-264.
\textsuperscript{412} Cited in Bulbeck, 1993, 158.
\textsuperscript{413} Donaldson, 1991, 63.
\textsuperscript{414} Collis, 1999, 72-73.
\textsuperscript{415} Tuttle, 1986, 69.
class women dominated these groups, some working class women did participate.\textsuperscript{416} From her study of secretaries at work Pringle noted ‘… it is not possible to predict if or when such small and disorganised resistances will develop into ‘something larger … what it will be about or what its outcome will be.’\textsuperscript{417}

Some battles are lost, some are won and some are irreconcilable and result in family disintegration. Gordon explains how in the worst situations these strains often underpinned cases of family violence:

\ldots as power struggles in which family members were ‘contesting for material, and often scarce, benefit’; women’s resistance as well as men’s accustomed dominance, was the trigger. Unemployment, for example, intensified violence, as women were angered not so much by men’s lack of financial support for themselves, but for their children. It was frequently women’s refusal of deference or servicing when men failed to provide economically that initiated men’s violence.\textsuperscript{418}

Walker contends the rates of domestic violence in Australia register the emotional and social suffering being endured within working class households; they suggest ‘male dominance is in reality difficult to achieve, that women too have power and that they fight back despite the very real risks to their physical and mental health.’\textsuperscript{419}

This view is a far cry from Engels conception of working class women as ‘the slave of his [the man’s] lust and a mere instrument for the production of children.’\textsuperscript{420} These texts speak to the hidden and unseen ways in which working class women challenge their

\textsuperscript{417} Cited in Collis, 1999, 74.
\textsuperscript{419} Walker, 1989, 247.
\textsuperscript{420} Cited in Townsend, 1996, 203.
oppressors despite the ever-present ‘implicit threat of aggression’.\textsuperscript{421} Collis concluded that where overt conflicts with their partners failed ‘… women turned to more covert ways of survival and resistance designed to challenge and disrupt the status quo. Such acts of resistance showed women to be resourceful and resilient…’\textsuperscript{422}

Zaretsky argued working class women have been charged with the impossible task of maintaining the home as a haven from the harsh world of capital.\textsuperscript{423} Observing the often lone struggle of working class women as far apart as northern India and the English Midlands, Seabrook observed the ‘women who remain and remember, where men run away and forget.’\textsuperscript{424} Collis similarly observed in a contemporary Australian mining town that ‘disengagement’, turning away and not facing conflict was adopted more by men than women. The higher prevalence of suicide amongst working class men perhaps offers further support for the destructive constructions of masculinity prevalent in western society.\textsuperscript{425} The implication for working class families, as Seabrook argues, is:

> Men are more easily defeated. They walk away. They do not stand and fight the daily war that is waged against the poor at the level of the resource-base, of the familiar home-place.\textsuperscript{426} The global rise of female headed households and the feminisation of poverty make this an all too familiar theme. As capital has increasingly commodified, controlled and impoverished the working class home and neighbourhood, the myth of haven has

\textsuperscript{422} Collis, 1999, 74.
\textsuperscript{424} Seabrook, 1993, 171.
\textsuperscript{426} Seabrook, 1993, 167.
become ever more untenable; to which the growing absence of working class men appears to bear witness.\textsuperscript{427}

There has been much discussion in class theory about how the working class might prevail over capitalism to free themselves from its clutches. Yet, countless millions of the world’s dispossessed have already perished under the global rule of capital – in too many cases with hardly a flicker of resistance or solidarity. Some suggest rebuilding solidarity movements and working class fighting organisations is paramount if labour is to have any prospects of liberation.\textsuperscript{428} Two decades ago Gollan noted the difficulties of such a task given the continuing sexual oppression within the working class:

\begin{quote}
The persistence of patriarchal attitudes within the working class itself not only destroyed attempts in the public sphere to build egalitarian structures but also ensure that oppression in the private sphere went unquestioned. … The ancient prohibitions, although severely dented in the course of women’s struggle to break free, nevertheless still ensure the social subordination of women.\textsuperscript{429}
\end{quote}

The social conditions of working class women in some contemporary contexts offer more opportunities for independence from men in the private sphere at least, but the problems of sexual inequality or oppression within the working class remain.\textsuperscript{430} Whether working class men and other supporters of labour are prepared to stand and fight alongside working class women remains to be seen. Given solidarity and struggle are the

\textsuperscript{427} Chant, 1997.
\textsuperscript{429} Gollan, 1980, 325-236.
\textsuperscript{430} Collis, 1999.
only means working class women have to liberate themselves, the question of
overcoming working class divisions is indeed crucial.431

While feminists often acknowledge the intersection of public and private life, the
challenge of reconnecting and moving ‘beyond the fragments’ of working class
women’s lives has yet to be faced in Australian political scholarship or activism.432

Pollert suggests this is politically imperative:

For the working-class majority of women it makes no sense to
fight their oppression as women in isolation from their
exploitation as workers. … The answer lies in building a
movement which grapples with the way sexual oppression is
fused with class exploitation, and this means recognising the
importance of wage labour as well as the home and the
family.433

In their multiple capacities as workers, community members, neighbours, mothers, and
partners, their private and public worlds collide. Patchesky explains:

‘Production’ and ‘reproduction’, work and the family far from
separate territories … reverberate upon one another and
frequently occur in the same social, physical and even psychic
spaces …434

Because working class women’s political outlook and activism is grounded in their
everyday experiences, their politics is ignored or trivialised. The Glasgow Women’s
Studies group emphasised the blinkered dismissal of women’s political culture:

Not only does politics not reflect the views of women but the
existing concerns of women come to be seen as peripheral to

431 Gollan, 1980, 315.
Political Economy: Changes in Women’s Employment in the United Kingdom." New Political Economy,
4, 2 (July).
‘real politics’. When women discuss ‘the treatment you get from the doctor these days’, ‘waiting for operations’, ‘damp in the back bedroom’, and ‘the price of a loaf’, they are more likely to be perceived as immersed in idle gossip rather than political comment. The trade union member who complains of ‘treatment from supervisors’, ‘fumes in the paint shop’, ‘cold on the shop floor’, and ‘cuts in wages’ is viewed rather differently.435

The foregoing literature considers various sites of contestation in which this dialectical process occurs, and simultaneously points to the salience of distinct local environments in shaping working class women’s politics. Social reproduction networks are vital for many working class women.436

Their survival and resistance is often geographically proscribed. Mobility and communication resources are distributed along class lines. Many working class women still do not have the luxury of regular, safe and reliable transportation (public or private) and many do not have access to the internet.437 Yet as Richards argues ‘empirical studies of Australian suburbs have been few, and even fewer have listened carefully to the voices of women.’438 Local political economy is a crucial component of greater understanding and engagement with working class women.439 To this end, the thesis

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takes the political economy of working class women in Campbelltown (New South Wales) as its point of departure.
3 Research Methodology

This chapter considers the methodology adopted in conducting a detailed examination of the political economy of working class women in a particular part of Australia. As the foregoing review demonstrates, the working class draws their sustenance and survival from various domains: the formal waged economy, the domestic household, and communities (geographical and/or associative). A political economy methodology that can analyse all of these domains, and the contradictory and interdependent relationships between them was required. The methodology needed to canvass the material and non-material aspects of working class women’s labours. Further it needed to be able to examine the political and economic agency of working class women and not just the structures that bind them.

The literature also reflects the distinct political and economic experiences of working class women in different parts of the country, in different industries and at different historical conjunctures. Hence, a political economy methodology grounded in a historical materialist approach was essential. This study sets out to examine the political economy of a group of working class women in a particular time and setting, that is, in contemporary Campbelltown (NSW). The first section of the chapter gauges the
usefulness of several existing political economy approaches in fulfilling these requirements. The second section provides a detailed explanation of the methodology employed and various implementation and analytical issues that arose from it.

**Methodology**

One of the earliest articulations of a political economy methodology was provided in Stilwell’s *Australian Urban and Regional Development*, in which he outlined five main elements.¹ The topic under examination should be situated within the ‘interaction of economic, social and political forces.’² The processes of conflict and cooperation between social groups should be analysed. An evaluative framework that queries ‘by what standards economic and social systems should be judged’ ought to be incorporated into the analysis.³ To this end, Stilwell employed Alonso’s ‘materialistic and non-materialistic’ criteria of efficiency, equity, environment and lifestyle in his evaluation of the effects of urban and regional policy.⁴ The constant flux of political economic systems must be accounted for. Lastly, the role of government as a politically charged institution, rather than a disinterested and benign apparatus, requires assessment. The application of this framework was limited to official statistics and aspects of formal political economic structures in Stilwell’s study, though he did not deny the significance

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² Stilwell, 1974, 2.
³ Stilwell, 1974, 4.
⁴ Stilwell, 1974. 4; also, 91-145.
of subjective evaluations. Feminist political economists have since argued for a ‘broad political economic framework’ that captures all the arenas in which women labour.

According to Armstrong and Armstrong, a historical materialist approach to political economy assumes

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\text{... the ways people co-operate to provide for their daily and future needs, combined with the techniques and materials at their disposal, establish the framework within which all human activity takes place.}
\]

Working from this premise, social reproduction theorists have expanded notions of the economy and the political to include the various types of labour and struggle in which women are involved. Early socialist feminists were particularly interested in women’s unpaid labour in the domestic sphere and the transformative possibilities of struggling for wages for housework.

Beasley’s theoretical study of non-material aspects of women’s labour in the household takes a feminist political economy methodology a step further. Her analytical focus is on women’s disproportionate share of the emotional division of labour in the household. She states:

\[
\text{... what is distinctive about women’s private labour and the economic organisation in sex relations is precisely the logic of}
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emotionality, of deeply personalised labour relations tied to love, affection, sexuality and relational bonds…\textsuperscript{10} Beasley recognised this logic contains the prospects for women’s agency through ‘instability, recalcitrance, contradiction or even resistance...’\textsuperscript{11} In her view, the privileging of the market in neo-classical and many Marxist conceptions of the economy is based on a denial of its dependence in part on women’s private unpaid emotional labour for its viability.\textsuperscript{12}

To apply a political economy of emotional labour in the household, Beasley suggests various measures of expropriation. Examples include subjective revaluations of different types of emotional activity, accounting for the life expectancy impacts of marriage on men and women, and more conventional market based assessments of time and money involved in caring, for example.\textsuperscript{13} In her view, a main point to evaluating private emotional work lies in challenging institutionalised sexism, such as the continuing material disadvantage women experience in divorce proceedings. She argues further that market based economics fails to grapple with the logics of emotionality, altruism, mutuality and care that underpin the domestic economy.\textsuperscript{14} Just as importantly, the impact of the formal economy and the logic of capital accumulation on emotional labour in different spheres of activity need to be examined.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{10} Beasley, 1994, 101.
\textsuperscript{13} Beasley, 1994, 102.
\textsuperscript{14} Beasley, 1994, 101, 109.
\textsuperscript{15} Peel, M. 1993. \textit{Making a Place: Women in the ‘Workers’ City‘}. Urban Research Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, 15.
While Beasley highlights a neglected aspect of women’s work, her depiction of women’s private emotional labour has limitations. It does not explain variations in women’s experiences of it; class, race, ethnicity, time and place are not considered in her work. Moreover, emotional labour performed for women is overlooked. The attribution of the logic of emotionality to women is problematic. It devalues men’s emotionality and does not account for alterations in the sexual division of emotional labour in different historical and material contexts. The interrelationship between women’s emotional labour and the market and the community also remains hidden. Emotional labour is a vital element of social reproduction that permeates all political economic arenas and all social relations.

An analytical difficulty with much feminist political economy lies in its limited conception of social reproduction. Pearson suggests:

> Because of the earlier emphasis on the ‘domestic labour’ aspect of reproduction, most feminist political economy has implicitly accepted the notion that reproductive activity is synonymous with domestically based work.

There has been a comparative neglect of the ‘triple role of women’ by western political economists; that is, women’s labours in the marketplace, the home and the community.

The latter arena of women’s labour is their unpaid work as community managers. This ‘community management’ work consists of:

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16 Beasley, 1994, 91.
18 Pearson, 2000, 228.
19 Pearson, 2000, 228.
The responsibilities women assume for organizing and managing services and infrastructure within their neighbourhoods, as well as for accessing services for their family members and negotiating or lobbying with representatives of the local and national state to secure a higher share of scarce public resources.\textsuperscript{20}

Community management sometimes involves individual work, but more often is a collective undertaking. The political significance of which is rarely acknowledged.\textsuperscript{21}

Pearson offers a powerful account of how an expanded conception of social reproduction that includes these three arenas of women’s work and struggle, strengthens political economic analysis. She examines the unique political economy of social reproduction in Cuba in the 1990s. It involves secondary source analysis and field work, primarily in the form of interviews and observation. In the context of Cuba’s political economic crisis and transition she contends:

\begin{quote}
Neglect of the work of producing social relations and values, as well as stocks of human and social assets, threatens the viability of the social reproduction of socialist goals and systems which was the original aim of the Cuban revolution.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

The decreasing ability of the Cuban state to meet the subsistence needs of the people has specific implications for women’s labour and politics. The state’s provision of meals in schools and workplaces, for example, formerly reduced women’s domestic social reproduction work and freed them to undertake other activities in the paid workforce or in voluntary collective and community work which were often rewarded with material incentives. This political economic arrangement assisted women’s community

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{20} Pearson, 2000, 228.
\textsuperscript{22} Pearson, 2000, 230.
\end{footnotesize}
management work and their involvement in the promulgation of collective and socialist values.

The crisis in Cuba’s formal political economy has coincided with the growth of a sizeable black market. Women have had to transfer more of their energies from the formal economy and unpaid community work to the informal economy and domestic labour in order to survive. The family and women’s work within it has become more important for survival, that is, there has been a ‘reprivatization of reproduction.’ The accompanying social atomisation and alienation not only registers and impacts on changes in the formal economy. The previous ‘bargain between the state, as provider and guarantor of economic and other entitlements, and the individual, as active participant in the revolutionary process, not only in terms of work but also in terms of political and community activism and voluntary labour in agriculture and construction’ is breaking down. Women’s growing absorption in domestic and market based labour is undermining their time, and in some cases their commitment (particularly amongst the young), for the reproduction of socialist relations and values.

In the Australian context, the characteristics of working class women’s community management work and its relationship to other economic arenas has not been the subject of detailed researched. Nonetheless, some Australian studies offer directions for such

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analysis.\textsuperscript{25} For example, Donaldson offers an examination of how the harnessing of people’s time and energy to the labour market and related activities (such as travel, work-related ill-health, training and education) is reducing their capacity for other non-market, community oriented and potentially anti-capitalist activities. His evidence is drawn from unorthodox data sources, such as traffic flow studies, occupational health studies and organisational memberships.\textsuperscript{26} From this eclectic evidence, Donaldson analyses the impact of capital accumulation on social reproduction work in the community and household, on a general level.

Including an examination of working class women’s labours in the community demands a feminist and localised political economy methodology. Peel’s study of outer suburban Elizabeth in South Australia offers the most penetrating example. He rejects conventional masculine perceptions of the outer suburbs. Peel observed: ‘Women established and maintained Elizabeth as a valued working-class territory and confirmed this as a place where the goals and the projects of ordinary people could work…’\textsuperscript{27} Peel captures the distinct relationships between place, class, gender and time.

Elizabeth was what a particular group of working-class women and men made of a specific moment of opportunity and constraint. It was what they brought to a place and what that place then made possible or impossible. So the story of Elizabeth is also about how people used and experienced the contingencies of a specific landscape, its housing and factories, its distance from and its nearness to.


\textsuperscript{26} Donaldson, 1996.

\textsuperscript{27} Peel, 1993, 2.
While Elizabeth and Campbelltown were both planned worker city’s only Elizabeth experienced the establishment of an industrial base. Nonetheless, the landscape in each reflected middle class and male values and aspirations. The working class residents changed the urban terrain to their own class and gender necessities and tastes.

‘Making do’ in Elizabeth involved a complex distribution of working class women’s labour across the formal economy, the household and the community. As Peel’s study focuses on their experiences from the 1960s until the 1980s, the patterning of this distribution reflects the broader political, social and economic processes from the 1960s until the 1980s. For example, corresponding with the then embryonic feminisation of the labour market, he notes working class women ‘largely fashioned their adult lives and identities outside the world of paid work.’28 Their pivotal role in the household and community reflected their generally ‘legitimate and even ultimate power and authority over those places’, notwithstanding experiences to the contrary.29 Even where men privately denied the value of their wives in the community, the material reality was otherwise.

It was women’s strategies, their skills and their links to networks of support outside the home that to a large degree determined how successfully the resources of prosperity were deployed. Women’s roles, in that sense, were far more exacting than men’s, though male breadwinners hardly had it ‘easy’ … Women’s responsibilities … imposed a heavy burden and implied an important status. They kept the kids fed and the wolves from the door; this was women’s lot, women’s life, women’s constant chore. And it was what women did because no one else was strong enough or smart enough to do it.30

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28 Peel, 1993, 16.
29 Peel, 1993, 18.
30 Peel, 1993, 19.
This involved managing the relationship between the household and community as in the case of liaising with schools, the health system and other public institutions. Women’s work in the community was not only directed at provisioning the household however.

The labour of neighbourhood networking reinforced bonds of solidarity in material and non-material ways. They embodied common experiences, grievances and struggles. Women’s work in the community involved the perpetuation of working class culture and values. This extended to ideas (if not always practiced) about appropriate gendered behaviours. Peel notes the expectations of ‘good men’:

No drinking or swearing at home, no fighting, no stealing from your own kind, no notions you were ‘more entitled’ than anyone else, no ‘keeping back’ or wasting what rightfully belonged to everyone. And they raised daughters to expect at least that from their partners.\(^{31}\)

Elizabeth’s women were the most vocal in fighting for community resources and managing the ‘outside’ of the home.\(^{32}\) This might involve community group work, lobbying for bus shelters, health services or school councils. Often these involvements were defensive actions against state or corporate intrusion. More common though was working class women’s use of informal childcare networks and other support mechanisms. Peel concludes: ‘Men defended the worker’s city on the factory floor. But everywhere else, Elizabeth’s guardians were almost always women.’\(^{33}\) Peel’s investigation highlights the significance of working class women’s political agency

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\(^{31}\) Peel, 1993, 21.
\(^{32}\) Peel, 1993, 22.
\(^{33}\) Peel, 1993, 26.
beyond the means of production, yet within the confines of a suburban territory heavily etched with the dictates of capitalist social relations.

Peel’s research drew on a mixed array of data. As an Elizabeth son, he made extensive use of his personal memories and incidental observations. He supplemented these subjective recollections with oral history data compiled by the South Australian Housing Trust in the 1980s. He also drew on other primary and secondary sources that recounted the political economy and social history of Elizabeth. This composite of mixed methods, of objective and subjective approaches, enabled Peel to approach his topic from different angles and to appreciate the myriad overlapping experiences of working class women in this particular time and place.

For the purposes of this study the strengths of the foregoing research approaches have been fused together to form a distinct political economy methodology. The foundation of the approach adopted here rests on an expanded conception of social reproduction. It supports Ferguson’s view:

To insist on bringing the underlying reality of households and communities, without which the formal economy could not exist, to the fore analytically is a long overdue corrective to the Marxist economics and socialist feminism of an earlier era.\(^{34}\)

Similarly, Pearson’s study above illustrated the analytical significance of ‘challenging the separation of social reproduction as well as daily and generational reproduction from the notion of what is economic.’\(^{35}\) Her research, and Peel’s to a lesser extent, offered examples of the kind of methodology required to examine the interconnectedness of the

\(^{34}\) Ferguson, 1999.

\(^{35}\) Pearson, 2000, 243.
three political economic arena’s working class women inhabit: the formal economy, the domestic household and the community. Hence it must blend macro and micro (local) levels of analysis.

A second consideration is the need to include the ways these political economy arenas are experienced in non-material, emotional, psychological and spiritual terms. Many of the works mentioned in this and the preceding chapter provide useful instances of how these subjective experiences might be documented and analysed qualitatively.36 More importantly, these works emphasise the intertwining of material and non-material experiences as both consequences of and contributors to specific political economy landscapes.

Finally, the methodology employed in this study is not only concerned with structural processes, patterns and their consequences as outlined in Stilwell’s early approach.37 The consequences and implications examined in this research go beyond the oppression experienced by working class women within the broad political economy. To explain the changeability of political economic terrains, which Stilwell noted as a key methodological element, it is essential to analyse working class women’s agency. A view of the broad political economy from the ground conveys the ways working class women survive, resist, and subvert individually and in combination, the forces that seek to enchain them.


37 Stilwell, 1974.
Methods and Research Issues

This section discusses the main research methods involved in implementing the methodology outlined above and questions stemming from their employment. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative sources was derived from primary and secondary data collection. Fieldwork was an important element in the overall process and is discussed in detail below.

Though the full range of local, state and federal government departments was sought out for data and reports, little information specific to working class women in Campbelltown was discovered. Community profiles of Campbelltown from the 1996 and 2001 Census was one of the more relevant sources.\(^{38}\) While, many of its data tables are cross-referenced with gender and age, few were matched with income levels. A persistent difficulty in researching the thesis related to the lack of studies on individual and family wealth.\(^{39}\) Other reports offered information on travel to work studies, health and local industry publications.\(^{40}\)

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\(^{38}\) Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 1996a. *Census 1996: Expanded Community Profile - Campbelltown*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2001a. *Census 2001: Expanded Community Profile - Campbelltown*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra. Quite detailed cross-referenced ABS data is now available at a price; unfortunately these costs were beyond the resources of this project. Moreover, the Expanded Community Profile for Campbelltown from the 2001 Census was not available at the time of statistical analysis. Therefore only data from the 2001 Basic Community Profile could be cross-referenced with 1996 data. Where 2001 breakdowns have been unavailable, 1996 data is provided instead.


Local newspapers provided little information about Campelltown’s working class women. They were a source of general data on the local political economy. The public perceptions and portrayals of working class women provide insights into cultural and ideological structures. Surveys of the two local newspapers, the *Macarthur Advertiser* and the *Macarthur Chronicle* were conducted between 1998 and 2003. There was a paucity of news articles, as opposed to sports articles and quasi advertisements, concerning local women generally. The views of male political and business leaders dominated. In part, this reflects the minimal investigative reporting in news making and orthodox notions of what qualify as ‘news’. It would appear working class women’s lives and concerns are of no relevance compared to public figures and events. With the exception of businesswomen who succeeded in the ‘malestream’ marketplace, women are not portrayed as community role models or leaders. There was little reporting on industrial disputes, occupational health issues, or any other manifestations of class conflict. Deep analysis of some articles on intra-suburban conflict offered small glimpses of these undercurrents. The media is essentially a conservative social institution and its local outlets are no exception.\(^\text{41}\)

A series of eleven in-depth interviews with local women forms the empirical backbone of this research. As the interviews were intended to provide thickly descriptive personal accounts of working class women experiences of the political economy, a small number

of respondents were recruited. This approach has been used in several relevant studies. Sidel’s work gave voice to the lives of eight working class women in New York. Campbell’s work drew upon the experiences of a small number of working class women from across northern England. More recently Bourdieu’s study on social suffering in contemporary France consists of around fifty interviews with people from diverse walks of life conducted by a team of twenty interviewers. This research does not intend nor claim to be representative; rather it is preliminary, exploratory and emblematic.

Purposive recruitment, or ‘snowballing’, was adopted to select participants for the study. One of the interviewees was known well by the author prior to the study and four others were irregular and distant acquaintances. The remaining seven women were met in the course of the research. The criterion for recruitment was that respondents be working class women who lived or had recently lived for more than two years in the Campbelltown area. No other conditions filtered the participants. There was no requirement that participants have any experience or interest in organised politics at any level. Several aspects of the recruitment process are noteworthy.

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43 Sidel, 1995 [1978].
45 Bourdieu, 1999.
Recruiting participants according to their social class is a contentious undertaking in contemporary Australia.\textsuperscript{47} Class models that attempt to reduce the complexity of human experience into a small number of fixed categories repeatedly run into difficulty.\textsuperscript{48} A historical materialist perspective lends itself to a versatile and context specific conception. The work of E. P. Thompson and its revisitation by Ellen Meiksins Wood provide a valuable framework for class analysis.\textsuperscript{49} They approach class as a structured process based on social relationships mediated by the specific manifestations of capital systems present in any given time or place. This is not a simple or necessarily direct relationship: ‘people who are joined in a class are not all assembled by the process of production itself or by the process of appropriation.’\textsuperscript{50} The process of class formation must be historically investigated, with the ‘experiences’ of individuals and communities being central to the connection between a person’s relation to the economy broadly speaking and their political consciousness. In other words, investigations of class must explore how structural processes affect people’s lives and their responses to them; it necessarily entails considering objective and subjective aspects of that relationship.\textsuperscript{51}


\textsuperscript{50} Meiksins Wood, 1995, 95.

\textsuperscript{51} Meiksins Wood, 1995, 97.
In snowballing for respondents, subjective perceptions of class were initially relied on.\textsuperscript{52} Participants were considered who described themselves as lower or working class women. As Figure 10 indicates, the need to vet potential interviewees on objective class criteria was not necessary.

**Figure 10 Selected characteristics of interview participants, 1998-1999\textsuperscript{53}**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Status</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Partner's Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heather Welfare</td>
<td>$40K</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>$15K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie Student/</td>
<td>$15K</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>$40K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deidre Admin</td>
<td>$40K</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>TAFE diploma</td>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>$40K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina Housewife/</td>
<td>$0K</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>TAFE diploma</td>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>$40K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda Housewife/</td>
<td>$0K</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>TAFE diploma</td>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>$40K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robyn Student</td>
<td>$15K</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>$15K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan Nurse</td>
<td>$30K</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>$20K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise Adult</td>
<td>$30K</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally Primary Teacher</td>
<td>$40K</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra Housewife</td>
<td>$10K</td>
<td>De-facto</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>Own</td>
<td>$40K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonya Student</td>
<td>$20K</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the participants relied completely on their own labours, a wage or wage replacement to survive. None owned any productive capital or assets except in the form of superannuation or the family home. The class experience of material and emotional struggle was common to all.

\textsuperscript{52} The author worked, studied and resided in Campbelltown from 1994 to 2004.
\textsuperscript{53} These were the characteristics of participants at the time of interview. Many details have changed since. Job Status indicates main occupation or undertaking; where students or housewives were looking for work ‘unemployed’ is added. Incomes are close estimates. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
Recruiting ‘women’ presents specific dilemmas. An important issue in this research was to include a variety of working class women, while avoiding tokenism. Participants were not filtered according to age, cultural background, sexuality, political or religious beliefs, marital status or parental status. Nevertheless, a larger study would have allowed for a broader cross-section of women, particularly drawn from more diverse age, cultural and religious groups.\(^{54}\) The sample group necessarily reflects the author’s social position as a female Anglo-Celtic research assistant and teacher in her mid thirties. The proportion of interviewees with post-school qualifications is therefore disproportionate, as is the predominance of participants from English speaking and nominally Christian backgrounds.

Many of the studies of working class women focus on those politically and consciously ‘active’ at a community, union or parliamentary level.\(^ {55}\) They pass over the experiences of the majority of women who do not enter these arenas or who do not enter with such overt formal political intentions. Little is known about the politics of everyday life and its broader significance for the social order. Levels of formal political activity were deliberately not considered in the selection process. This aspect of recruitment was intended to be as random as possible in order to examine a diversity of ‘political’ lives; that is, the broad political experiences of working class women in different political economic arenas and as a product of different personal biographies. Consequently, some

\(^{54}\) The minimal resources available to the project limited its scope to the extent that important groups of working class women were not included in the interviews such as Aboriginal, Islamic or imprisoned women. Efforts have been made to incorporate their experiences through existing data sources, though these are scarce.

of the interviewees were more active in ‘public’ politics than others and some were not at all. Though participants agreed to be involved in a study about working class women’s political experiences and attitudes, not all saw themselves as politically minded or interested. The interview process had to delve beneath these seemingly apolitical dispositions.

The interview schedule was wide-ranging and loosely structured around three central focus points: personal biography, life in Campbelltown, and socio-political experiences and attitudes. After explaining these three unprioritised areas of discussion, the participants were simply asked to discuss their experiences and views as they came to mind. This enabled them, within the context of the project, to lay down their own priorities and self-perceptions from the outset, rather than the researcher pre-empting them. Each interview followed a unique, and largely unprompted, journey through the main research themes. Biographical discussion canvassed experiences of family, education, belief systems, work, social life, marriage, children, housing, finances, decision making and self-perceptions. This open introduction provided participants with an opportunity to shine some light on their own lives and pay some rare attention to themselves. It encouraged participants to remember, reflect on and momentarily draw together the often fractured segments of their lives.

Discussions about living in Campbelltown considered insider and outsider perceptions of the area, social relations between residents, community involvement, local influential people, and changes to the area. Participants were encouraged to consider how their personal narratives were connected to this social landscape. Conversations around
personal biographies and living in Campbelltown elicited information about private, unorganised, informal, everyday, survival politics.

Discussions about participants’ experiences of, and attitudes to, public, organised, formal politics were often left until last by the participants and the researcher. Conversation covered any formal or public political experiences they might have had, their reflections on the political system, philosophies and principles, parties and voting, attitudes to politicians, trade unions, protests and their social and political priorities.

This last area of discussion proved the most challenging for some women to articulate as they had rarely been consulted on such issues. Though it may be common for them to criticise politicians, the government or businesses, these complaints are rarely conceived as political dissent. Their everyday life experiences may be immersed in political processes and responses, yet they are seldom articulated in explicitly political terms. Talk about doing the shopping, paying the bills, low wages, casualisation, unemployment, welfare, ill-health, government policies and coping strategies are all political conversation – politics is the subtext of everyday life.\(^{56}\) For many people, this is a broader and unfamiliar way of seeing politics. A few were self-deprecating about their lack of involvement with public politics. Nonetheless, all participants took the opportunity to spell out their frustrations, disenchantment, disenfranchisement, and dissidence. Participants were also encouraged to reflect on the connections between their own lives and political happenings ‘out there.’

The interview length was left to the participants’ discretion. On average they lasted four hours, with some extending for more than one session. As previously mentioned, for some women it was a rare opportunity to be heard, largely uninterrupted, about their own lives and views. Given the wide-ranging nature of the interviews, it offered a chance for some women to pull their fractured selves back together for a brief while. This is perhaps unsurprising in a contemporary society that expects people to ‘act out’ or emotionally labour at different roles at work, with the kid’s teachers, at the doctor’s and so on. Many women later commented on the therapeutic effect of the interview or the way it had helped them see their lives differently and somehow more connectedly; for some this was a traumatic journey.57

Ann Oakley has highlighted the contradictions in the process of ‘interviewing women.’58 She argues the way women interact in an ‘interview’ situation does not correspond with the conventional ‘scientific’ requirements of interviewing. The unorthodoxy of interviewing women was evident in the present study. For example, some of the women took on the role of researcher by answering questions with questions: ‘what do you think about that’; ‘why do you want to know that’; ‘how do you react when interviewees tell you this’; or ‘what would you do in my situation?’ Some would mercilessly correct minor slips of the tongue. One woman in her early forties was inadvertently asked about family life before television was invented, rather than affordable. ‘I might look it, but

57 All interviews were tape recorded. Draft copies of all publications arising from the research were also provided to the relevant interviewees, and participants were invited to attend relevant presentations. On one occasion several suggestions were made about phrasings that the participant felt more comfortable with, and these alterations were made. No other objections were raised.
I’m not that bloody old!’ was the caustic reply. Given an opportunity to speak out, their inquisitiveness, intelligence and self-possession was irrepressible.

Moreover, some of the practicalities of interviewing working class women make a mockery of traditional conceptions of interview protocols. Uninterrupted time and space is a luxury for working class women, there are no meeting rooms or voicemail facilities to keep their worlds at bay for a few hours. Getting away from the home or work was impossible for some. In these cases, interview time was shared with crying babies, barking dogs, roaring mowers, hungry or squabbling schoolchildren, and hovering partners. On one occasion a perseverant women was determined to finish the interview, while also trying to prevent her two warring teenagers from damaging each other, the flat or herself; a not uncommon occurrence.

Continuing the interview and having an acquaintance in the house (despite offers to postpone) may have prevented a volatile situation from escalating. It also meant her ordeal had been shared and corroborated. For other women, participating in an interview at home was impossible. One of the younger respondents had no suitable private space in the family home. Similarly, a lesbian couple was temporarily living in the home of their disapproving mother because of an accommodation and financial crisis, and dared not invite visitors into the house. On these occasions interviews were variously conducted at local parks and clubs (to a soundtrack of poker machine jingles), or on the author’s bedroom floor. Interviewing working class women highlighted their battles for control over time and place – this was reflected in the absence of public or private spaces where they could comfortably and confidentially speak with one another.
The relatively small sample size precluded any extensive pilot study to test the effectiveness of the interview schedule and process. Nevertheless, the initial interviews were extremely useful for refining the approach. They were conducted with Belinda, Deidre, Gina (migrated from South America in the 1970s), and Heather and Jackie (a lesbian de-facto couple). This group contained considerable diversity in terms of sexuality, cultural background, marital and family status, occupation and education levels. They helped shape the range of topics to be covered and the way they were canvassed.

Encouraging respondents to lead the interview over areas of importance to them created anxiety for some of the women about the relevance of their contributions to the research topic. Participants were more than happy to talk about their everyday lives; it was the ‘political’ connection that caused confusion. These concerns reflected the devaluation of working class women’s politics and their internalisation of those judgements, as well as the broader de-politicisation of working class life experiences. The first interviews indicated the requirement for a little more structure and preliminary explanation of how the interviews related to the overall project and research aims.

Some initial lines of questioning were too personal or painful, or were raised too early in the interviews. Questions about family relations tended to trigger the most painful memories. The way these issues were broached ended up following a less direct path, so that the women could control the emotional depth of their responses without feeling they were not doing a ‘good job’ of the interview. It was equally important to respect the
pauses and silences. Some women were determined not to speak of painful experiences. Unable to convey their trauma in words, physical responses (crying, trembling, chain smoking) spoke of deep-seated injuries. The spoken and written word are unable to communicate some experiences – what can be voiced and recorded may ultimately be the least painful aspects of life – inevitably an understatement of suffering and resilience.

The early interviews suggested other angles for exploring working class women’s politics. Reminiscing, for example, was an important vehicle for expressing self-perceptions and worldviews – the distance from the events offered a less threatening approach through which to explain thoughts that the women felt may be confronting in relation to their current relationships, for example. It also highlighted the importance of life history for understanding the fluidity of politicisation.

Moreover oral historians have observed distinct gender differences in memory making. In some studies women tended to remember significant private and family happenings, while public events were rarely mentioned. This was true of the current study to some extent. Some of the interviewees had difficulty recalling recent major current affairs issues. Passerini and Leydesdorff argue this tendency reflects the historical confinements and preoccupations of women’s lives. Though the contexts of working class women’s lives in the present study are quite different, the daily material and emotional struggles

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they experience echoed those recorded from working class women in other times and places.62

These considerations were also salient to the data analysis process. How to investigate the diversity of social experience without jettisoning the political economic structures that forge variations in the human landscape is a fundamental question. Bourdieu once suggested the ‘analyst’s intrusion’:

… let[s] us see these lives as necessary through a systematic search for the causes and reasons they have for being what they are. How can we give explanations without pinpointing individuals? How can we avoid making the interview and its analytical prologue look like a clinical case preceded by a diagnosis? … These considerations led us to present cases so that the reading connects individuals whose completely different points of view might very well be at odds, even clash, in real life.63

The interviews for the present study were approached in a similar way. Conflicting standpoints and differences in experience were commonplace. Women involved in similar fields of work who expressed similar social justice goals, for example, held polar views about formal politics and political ideology. Heather adopted a radical political perspective in her community work, whereas, Gina had deep reservations about the ‘left-wing’ ALP and communists, stemming from her experiences of politics in South America. These differences can only be explained through reference to the specific


63 Bourdieu, 1999, 1.
contexts in which personal experience, social structures and competing ideological influences intertwine.

Participant observation was an outcome, if not a scientifically practiced method, of the research process. It was an inevitable product of the study given the unusual relationship of the researcher to the research setting and participants. Peel’s work, noted above, made similar use of personal memories and experiences from his upbringing in Elizabeth as did Davis’ political economy of Los Angeles.64

Davis’ captured the interplay and conflict between different social groups, particularly classes, in part through incidental participant observation of the built environment as much as its inhabitants.65 By juxtaposing ganglands with police precincts, gated communities with industrial wastelands, shopping malls with corporate skyscrapers, Davis was able to scrutinise the spatial demarcation of capital accumulation and the consequent political destabilisation and class conflict that ensued. His analysis conveyed not only how people cope with social inequality and exploitation, but what they do about it and how they manipulate the structural fabric. This kind of observational analysis, first pioneered by Engels, is a relatively underused method in contemporary political economy.66

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65 Davis, 1990.
The importance of including this material in a political economy methodology is alluded
to by Braudel who argued the structural manifestations of the social order may appear to
have little ‘to do with the humble lives at the foot of the ladder … [however] the
inequalities, the injustices, the contradictions large and small, … made the world go
round and endlessly transformed its upper structures.’ The method is not
systematically employed throughout this project, but it did inform the collection and
analysis of local data, often unwittingly.

Inescapably, an ‘insider’ status has deeply influenced the data analysis process.
Impressions of life in Campbelltown gained from riding the same trains, shopping at the
same supermarkets, attending the same health services, walking the same streets, as the
respondents have affected the researcher’s viewpoint. Relevant ‘data’ was being
collected consciously or unconsciously at every moment. Just going to the bathroom
exposed the researcher to the raucous arguments and conversations of neighbours. The
boundaries between research time and non-research time blurred.

Disengagement from the project was less straightforward. For example, the researcher
continues to have access to information about the participants’ lives or be invited to
family outings. An unspoken contract of ongoing reciprocity and participation was
entered into when recruiting some participants. In this context the researcher is
implicated, connected and engaged on a far deeper level than is usually the case – this

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University of California Press, Los Angeles, 562.
can enable more penetrating research as well as a higher personal and material toll on the researcher.

Moreover, the project itself was in a dialectical relationship with a section of local working class women. The project was in part a recording of their lives and experiences, but also influenced them in tangible ways beyond the interview setting. The spontaneous events captured in the following paragraphs demonstrate the agency of respondents and once again how the researcher was drawn into unintended participant observation. These developments demonstrate how the research brought working class women together to talk about issues affecting their everyday lives from an explicitly political standpoint, which eventually led to a brief flowering of collective action.

In April 1998, four months into the project the researcher attended a local weekend forum with the hope of learning something about local working class women and perhaps recruiting some interviewees. The forum, ‘Feminism With Bras On’, was organised by a long-standing and respected women’s community agency, Women in the Local Macarthur Area (WILMA). Their aim was to provide an opportunity for local women to explore women-specific issues in a supportive and non-threatening environment. Topics included: harassment, self-development, employment, trade unions, domestic violence, sexuality and social class issues. The fairly inaccessible location, registration costs and lack of childcare meant the fifty participants were mainly community, welfare, health and university sector workers. Nonetheless, the numerous ordeals of working class women were privately going on beneath the forum’s main order of events for some attendants. Ill-health, domestic concerns, and borrowing enough
money for drinks and the petrol home preoccupied many women. The researchers
learning and recruitment objectives were achieved and more.

Some of the women at the forum were keen to maintain contact with the people they had
met and learn more about the thesis, which had been discussed informally at the event.
Subsequently six women (including the researcher) met again at which point they agreed
to form an ongoing discussion group on issues affecting local women. All six were
employed in the health and welfare sectors with the exception of the author. Four of the
women lived in the Campbelltown area and two resided in the neighbouring Wollondilly
district. The three Campbelltown women (Jackie, Heather and Denise) were eventually
interviewed for the study. The people involved in the ongoing discussion group are
referred to in the thesis simply as the ‘Women’s Group’; it was never formalised or
named in practice.

As there was no formal organisation or hierarchy, the researcher actively and equally
participated in meetings, discussions, networks, planning and material outcomes. Over
the Group’s relatively short life around twenty different women participated at different
stages. Group members were aware at all times of the nature of the researcher’s dual
status. The research was a topic of conversation in many meetings and the Group
became an informal community reference group with whom various aspects of the
project could be discussed. At the same time, the researcher was able to observe several
interviewees in a different context from the interview setting.
More importantly, the Women’s Group offered powerful insights into working class women’s informal collective politics in action. The main material outcome of the Women’s Group was the spontaneous emergence of an informal food cooperative, which outlasted the Group meetings themselves. The main emotional outcome of the Group was the extension of many women’s support networks that exist to this day. The material and emotional outcomes were entwined however. Women who met through the Group provided refuge for women in trouble, long-term housing support, employment opportunities and a myriad of other assistances. Group members also continued to provide the researcher with interview contacts and opportunities to interact with local working class women in various contexts. For example, the researcher was invited to be guest speaker at an adult education course for some of the working class women of Claymore. The researcher was also invited to observe a local community arts initiative for working class women in Airds. The Women’s Group was a vital source of data and insight for the thesis. It indicated the relevance of the research to local working class women and their assertiveness in claiming it is a resource for their own ends. These events reinforced the possibilities of research as a political intervention.

In sum, the methodology encompasses a broad conceptualisation of political economy as including activities in the formal economy, the household and the community. It includes an examination of the material and non-material processes and experiences of this broader political economy. Lastly, it investigates the dialectical relationship between social structures and human agency. This framework informs the structure of the substantive chapters to follow. Chapter Four examines the Campbelltown political economy landscape, in the broad terms outlined above, from the standpoint of working
class women. It draws on a wide array of data sources including interview material, official statistics, media content, local health reports, government reports, corporate reports, parliamentary speeches, secondary sources, and some observations. Similarities and differences between the Campbelltown political economy and state or national trends are drawn out where possible. Chapter Five considers how working class women make Campbelltown work for them and their communities. It primarily rests on fieldwork involving eleven in-depth interviews with local working class women and participant observations and interactive developments. The final chapter analytically synthesises the relationship between the material presented in Chapters Four and Five, and explains the broader political economic significance of the findings.
This chapter begins the task of mapping and analysing the political economy of working class women in Campbelltown (NSW). It investigates the social relations emanating from the three main arenas absorbing their labour: the formal waged economy, the community and the household. Three respective sections are devoted to considering how private capital and the state influence each arena. The material and non-material consequences for working class women and the interconnections between these arenas are examined. More specifically, the chapter asks how these political economic arenas assist or hinder working class women to sustain themselves, their families and communities. For example, how beneficial and relevant are formal employment and community services to working class women? How do capital and the state respond to the political economy of working class women? How much control do they have over the structures affecting their lives? How sustainable are these processes and relationships? The answers offer a context for understanding the opportunities, limitations and strategies working class women adopt as they struggle for survival and a better way of life, as examined in the following chapter.
Formal Structures

This first section focuses on the relationship between private capital, the state and working class women in the formal political economy. It particularly emphasises the contribution of private capital and the state to their income. It considers how the structure of the formal labour market in Campbelltown affects their ability to survive. The influence of the state, especially its local manifestations, on the direction and structure of the labour market is also discussed. Moreover, these processes are analysed in relation to the structural imperatives of capital accumulation.

The findings raise questions about the efficiency of the capitalist mode of production in meeting human need and the agenda of the state in perpetuating this political economic system. Contradictions in the relationship between private and public capital are also examined, especially with respect to labour control issues. Further, the foundations are laid for understanding the interconnectedness of the market and non-market political economic arenas in which working class women labour.

Over the past decade, private and public capital has transformed Campbelltown from an outer suburban dormitory into a regional city. In the 1980s, a lack of industrial and commercial investment in the region contributed to the high levels of local

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unemployment and social disadvantage.\textsuperscript{2} Today there is no shortage of investment dollars and business activity, yet the inequality continues.\textsuperscript{3}

Considerable infrastructural, aesthetic and cultural improvements have been undertaken to entice private capital, affluent homebuyers, and higher skilled labour to the city. The state and local government upgraded the local railway station, increased commuter car parking spaces, and beautified the city’s main street and some suburban shopping centres.\textsuperscript{4} These public investments are defended with claims that the inflow of private capital and skilled workers is the soundest approach to achieving local prosperity and reducing the ‘pockets of serious social disadvantage’ in the region.\textsuperscript{5}

Private capital and homebuyers have certainly rushed into the district in recent years. In 2002-03 Campbelltown City Council approved over $400 million of development applications and anticipated applications worth over $1 billion in 2003-04.\textsuperscript{6} What benefit might accrue to working class women and other disadvantaged residents when several examples of recent corporate developments are examined?

\textsuperscript{6} CCC, 2003a, 2.
One of the more ambitious local developments is the construction of the $250 million, 60-hectare Macarthur Regional Centre (MRC) by Landcom’s Business Land Group\textsuperscript{7} and Stockland Corporation.\textsuperscript{8} The MRC is intended to ‘provide a new commercial, entertainment and residential hub for the region.’\textsuperscript{9} It comprises medium density townhouses and units at ‘Park Central’, ‘shop-top living’, retail precincts, a 300 unit retirement village and a 60 bed nursing home.\textsuperscript{10} The centre is being marketed to a more ‘discerning’ or affluent consumer than Campbelltown’s average income earners. Park Central ‘executive’ homes sell for $430,000.\textsuperscript{11} While working class women are unlikely to afford living or shopping in the MRC, appropriation of the surplus value they create from their low paid and insecure employment in a few caring, cleaning and retail jobs will contribute to investor profits.

Adjacent the MRC, the Campbelltown Catholic Club is erecting the city’s first five-star hotel from the losses of gaming patrons.\textsuperscript{12} The ‘Catho’ extracted approximately $20 million from the community in 2002.\textsuperscript{13} Peter Breen, son of a Catholic Club founding father, has accused the Club of abandoning its philanthropic mission:

\textsuperscript{7} Weber, 1999, 1, 7.
\textsuperscript{10} Landcom, 2002. It is being developed by Perth-based Caversham Property, an associated company of Futuris Corporation.
\textsuperscript{12} Weber, 1999, 1, 7.
... it raises the question of who's going to patronise an international hotel in a community like Campbelltown, which at the end of the day is a poor community by comparison with other parts of Sydney. ... it ought to be a retirement village, for example. People wait ten years in Campbelltown to get into a retirement village. ... What they [the Catholic Club] give to the local community, in my opinion, is a pittance compared with the amount of money that they take. ... To use the extra money to build an international hotel is just way beyond the kind of community objectives, certainly that the founding members of the club had in mind when they established the club.14

Breen is not alone in accusing gaming venues of siphoning wealth from lower income suburbs.15 The total profit (that is, net player losses) from gaming machines in the Campbelltown/Camden district for 2001-02 was $101 million (most of which accrued to Campbelltown establishments).16 Local operators take 10% more profit per machine than the state average from the local community.17 Once again, beyond a smattering of lower paid jobs, Campbelltown’s working class women will receive little benefit from such a development.

Considerable effort has been directed to the diversification and expansion of industrial and technological capacity in the region.18 The Macarthur Region of Councils (MACROC) strategy for achieving this includes the promotion of nano-technology, high technology agriculture, and plastics and tool manufacturing (the latter through the $100 million Australian Austool Innovation Centre in Ingleburn19). To this end, MACROC

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14 Crittenden, 2002. Catholic Club general manager, Stephen Muter, reported the club gives $1 million a year to the community that is 6% of net gaming machine revenue.
17 DOTARS, 2003, 41.
receives assistance from state and federal governments, the local TAFE and the
University of Western Sydney. In job creation terms, this kind of technology intensive
production will employ a limited number of highly skilled and predominantly male
workers. In 2001, only 11 per cent of local jobs were in chemical, plastics and tool
manufacturing. The strategy is being pursued even though MACROC acknowledges in
its economic development plan the inconsistency between a high technology,
‘knowledge’ economy development strategy and the actual educational and skills levels
of local workers.

It is claimed the substantial public monies, land and government resources funneled into
nano-technology developments will produce over 700 jobs, though not necessarily for
local workers. Campbelltown’s unemployed may be fortunate to garner a few of the
cleaning and clerical jobs from these industries. In labour terms, nano-technology
promises longer term job losses – machines to make machines – self-replicating artificial
intelligence. This brave new world renders more workers superfluous to requirements
in the long-run.

Crow and Sarewitz have argued ‘the impact of rapid technological innovation on people’s lives is usually not consensual.’\textsuperscript{24} Too often new technologies have promised the world, yet delivered more workers to the scrap heap and provided the powerful with greater means of capital accumulation and social control.\textsuperscript{25} While local newspapers tout the benefits of nanotechnology for cooling beer, they are silent on its military applications.\textsuperscript{26} Campbelltown workers have not been adequately informed or consulted about the aforementioned developments. There has been no public debate on the pros and cons and there are no guarantees or indication that local workers will significantly benefit from this expenditure of their community’s resources.

Land was one of Campbelltown’s greatest natural assets that might have generated considerable local employment when the inner-city land squeeze and construction of the


\textsuperscript{26} Berry, 2003. The establishment of a network of regional nano-technology hubs was flagged in a report from the Prime Minister’s Science and Technology Advisory Council (Crow and Sarewitz, 2000). The report cites Ingleburn (a Campbelltown suburb) firm, Precision-Valve Australia (PVA), as its prime case study. These plans echo similar projects underway in the United States. For example, in New Jersey ‘…the Army’s investment in nanotechnology combined with industry and academic research will lead to a ‘Nano Valley … The Army needs some sort of process by which [nanotechnologies can be put] in the hands of weapons developers’ (Brown, D. 2003. "US Army Plans New Center to Develop Military Nanotech." \textit{Small Times}. Accessed 7th February, 2003 at www.smalltimes.com/print_doc.cfm?doc_id=4030). It is one example of the new-look global military industrial complex. Crow and Sarewitz argue ‘the earliest applications of nanotechnology will come in the military realm, where specific needs are well-articulated, and a customer – the Department of Defence – already exists. One area of desired nano-innovation lies in the “increased use of enhanced automation and robotics to offset reductions in military manpower, reduce risks to troops, and improve vehicle performance”’ (2000, 96). Military applications of nano-technology are already being explored in Campbelltown. The aforementioned Ingleburn firm, PVA, has ‘developed the first industrial laser system in Australia in conjunction with the Department of Weapons and Research.’ These applications of nano-technology have not been raised in the local media.
Western Sydney Orbital freeway commenced.\textsuperscript{27} In the Council’s haste to attract domestic and foreign capital, irrespective of how little employment they generated, Campbelltown’s jobless vacant industrial lots have been converted into jobs poor parking lots in the space of ten years. Some of the larger and global corporations to establish in Campbelltown include: Stanley-Bostitch (USA), Kawasaki’s Prixcar Services (Japan), Unilever’s Streets Icecream (UK), Bulmers (UK), the Crane Group’s Consolidated Extrusions (Aust), Lang Corporation’s TDG Autocare, Franklins, Coles-Myer (at Smeaton Grange) and Oldfields Holdings (Aust).\textsuperscript{28} Businesses employing more than 50 workers accounted for just 0.02\% of the labour force in 2001.\textsuperscript{29} Space intensive, but jobs poor, enterprises such as car, shipping container and grocery warehousing dominate the industrial landscape.

Today MACROC admits ‘appropriately zoned employment land will run-out in three years.’\textsuperscript{30} The current utilisation rate of 50 hectares/annum is expected to rise to 80 hectares/annum in several years. MACROC confesses ‘this is a major disconnect with projected population growth.’\textsuperscript{31} Seemingly isolated instances, such as the conflict over Capral Aluminium’s plans to erect a plant near residential suburbs and Redox Chemicals expansion plans are the tip of a deep iceberg of territorial and class conflict emerging in

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{27} Powell, 1993.
\textsuperscript{28} Anonymous. 2004a. \textit{The Business Who’s Who of Australia}. R. G. Riddell Pty Ltd, Sydney. The major shareholders in the publicly listed firms were finance capital institutions such as Westpac, National Bank, AMP and Chase Manhattan.
\textsuperscript{29} DOTARS, 2003, 60.
\textsuperscript{30} MACROC, 2004, 12.
\textsuperscript{31} MACROC, 2004, 13.
\end{footnotesize}
It seems likely the environment and amenity of Campbelltown will be sacrificed to the zoning requirements of industrial capital (with no guarantee of a sufficient increase in local employment) and workers will fritter away more of their lives travelling to work and exacerbating congestion and pollution.

With small business comprising 87% of local enterprises, this highly fragmented economy offers up no obvious or single industrial entity (as in large industry dominated localities) that might be confronted. Moreover, a myriad of regional organisations exercise control over the structure and direction of Campbelltown’s formal political economy. These agencies include: the Macarthur Business Enterprise Centre, GROW (formerly the Macarthur Area Assistant Program), the Campbelltown Sustainable Regions Advisory Committee (a federally funded and appointed organisation), the Campbelltown Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Campbelltown City Council, the Macarthur Advisory Group of the Sydney Area Consultative Committee, MACROC, and Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WSROC). The strong presence of local business people in these organisations has contributed to a fixation with the capitalist mode of production. Other political economic strategies that might better meet the needs of the population are ignored. This web of economic and political power undermines and disperses the defence and advancement of working class interests, particularly at the point of production.

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33 DOTARS, 2003, 60.
MACROC claim responsibility for ‘the facilitation of economic prosperity’ in the region with the collaboration of councilors, government appointees and ‘significant business and community leaders’ (only a portion of who have been publicly elected). 34 MACROC’s bi-annual CEO Forum, for instance, brings together ‘Macarthur Business Owners, Chief Executive Officers and the region's "decision makers"’ to learn of new prospects for extracting profits from the area. 35

More importantly, these entities decide which sections of the formal economy will be succoured by public monies. As previously indicated MACROC and GROW were instrumental in attracting millions of dollars for the Austool Innovation Centre, for example. 36 While these collaborations give the appearance local planning is in the hands of representative government, a sizeable section of these influential actors are not directly accountable to the electorate. The state effectively props up the façade of democratic governance while permitting private industry to exert disproportionate influence over economic policy behind the scenes. The decisions and rationale of these ‘leaders’ have escaped serious challenge.

Local government appears spellbound by the mantra of capitalist democracy, never questioning the legitimacy of private ownership of social resources. Though it is conveniently ignored, the above organisations are spending the collective public savings of labour. Yet working class representatives are absent from their ranks. Indeed, there

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are no local union offices, no regional trades and labour council, no local political or industrial organisations around which labour might coalesce on their own terms.\textsuperscript{37} Campbelltown’s working class women are allowed no real control over the shape and future of the formal political economic order of their city.

The private interests of industry and the working class are structurally irreconcilable. The subordination of labour is a fundamental precondition of all enterprises operating under the rule of capital. Representatives of capital are therefore structurally impervious to the emancipation of labour and the common or public provisioning of human needs. How, or if, the local champions of capital accumulation have managed to reconcile these contradictions in favour of the public interest, remains unclear.

The fetishisation of the market economy is justified through the unquestioned assumption that an adequate share of benefits will trickle down to the rest of the population.\textsuperscript{38} There is little sign the above developments, even during these ‘boom’ times, deliver much material benefit to Campbelltown’s working class women. The following passages consider how they have fared in employment terms from the local economic leadership of private capital and its state counterparts.

\textsuperscript{38} Hamilton, C. 2003. \textit{Growth Fetish}. Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.
In 1996, MACROC reported 5500 new local jobs per annum were needed for the next twenty years to absorb the growing workforce. Given the suppression of labour costs is crucial to the viability of profit growth this is proving an impossible task. In the five years to 2001, 2718 new jobs were attained by Campbelltown workers. This growth was entirely composed of part-time positions and the loss of 100 full-time jobs. Moreover, the proportion of the adult population in employment has stagnated during this time. Between 1991 and 2001 the labour force participation rate has dropped from 67.3% to 62.9%. Local leaders have sidestepped the issue that capitalism’s structural imperative is to minimise labour costs and power.

Undermining labour force power and reproducing an army of unemployed and underemployed workers is central to capital accumulation. Moreover, capital must deflect liability for the social turmoil and disadvantage resulting from its incapacity to meet basic human needs. Divisions of labour along gender and cultural lines are a by-product of, and a scapegoat for, the structural logic of this mode of production.

Labour force participation rates indicate the extent to which the formal waged economy is able to meet essential material needs. The 2001 Census shows 45% of the adult

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41 ABS, 1996b, B01 and B18; ABS, 2001a, B01 and B25. Adult population refers to residents 15 years and older. In 1996 the proportion of adults employed was 58% compared to 57% in 2001.
42 DOTARS, 2003, 44.
population were not engaged in any kind of formal employment and 66% of the adult population were not engaged in full-time work. Two-thirds of Campbelltown’s adult population has little choice but to turn to non-market economies for part, and in most cases all, of their material needs. While many of these people are involved in educational pursuits, caring work, poor health, or retirement, the above average rate of local unemployment (at least 8%) indicates the majority are surplus to the requirements of capital in any case.

Marginalisation of Campbelltown workers from paid employment is unevenly distributed. In 2001, 51% of Campbelltown women were not in any kind of official employment and 74% were not in full-time employment, reflecting a plateauing of 1996 figures. Indigenous women recorded the lowest participation rates and those from most non-English speaking countries fared little better. The formal labour market’s reproduction of class, gender and cultural inequalities assists in obscuring the wider reduction of necessary labour under capitalism.

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44 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 1996a. Census 1996: Expanded Community Profile - Campbelltown. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, X20; ABS, 2001a, B25. Adult population here refers to residents 15 years and older, as this is the legal age at which people are able to commence employment.

45 ABS, 1996a, X20; ABS, 2001a, B25. Little empirical research has been conducted on hidden unemployment in Australia. Stilwell noted a national survey was conducted in Britain in the 1960s, revealing hidden unemployment was as high as the official unemployment rate and in the same period a survey of female unemployment in Wollongong indicated concealed unemployment to be nine times the official figures, particularly for married women (Stilwell, F. 1974. Australian Regional and Urban Development. ANZ Books, Brookvale, NSW). Recent work by Barrett estimates the real unemployment figure (9.8%) for women to be almost double the official rates (5.3%) in 2003 in South Australia (Barrett, S. 2004. Beyond the Unemployment Rate: Three New Measures of Labour Under Utilisation for South Australia. Australian Bulletin of Labour, 30, 1 (March), 60.

46 ABS, 1996b, B01 and B18; ABS, 2001a, B01 and B25. Adult population here refers to residents 15 years and older, as this is the legal age at which people are able to commence employment.

47 ABS, 1996a, X21.
The contribution of private capital to local employment is reduced further when public sector employment is taken into account. Though the private retail sector is the largest single industry (18.2%) employing local women, the public sector employs a quarter of Campbelltown’s women workers (see Figure 11).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>4452</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>4976</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Community Services</td>
<td>3648</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>4040</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property and Business Services</td>
<td>2470</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>2949</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>2857</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>2915</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>-0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2445</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>2567</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>-0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and Insurance</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>-0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation, Cafes, Restaurants</td>
<td>1156</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1447</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale Trade</td>
<td>1132</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>1158</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>-0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Administration/Defence</td>
<td>1196</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1110</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>-86</td>
<td>-0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and Other Services</td>
<td>1029</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1008</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>-21</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport and Storage</td>
<td>702</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>-31</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural and Recreational Services</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Services</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>-41</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>-43</td>
<td>-0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, Gas and Water Supply</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>25582</td>
<td></td>
<td>27394</td>
<td></td>
<td>1812</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is mainly due to the over-representation of women in public sector dominated education, health and community services industries. Private capital provides a living for a third of Campbelltown women and while this figure has been stable since 1996, most of the new jobs have been part-time, reflecting the growth in the heavily casualised retail, accommodation, cafes and restaurants sectors.

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49 ABS, 1996a, X23; ABS, 2001a, B26. Male workers are more concentrated in private sector dominated industries such as manufacturing, retail, construction, transport and storage, and property and business services.
50 ABS, 1996b, B01 and B18; ABS, 2001a, B01 and B25.
In Campbelltown, the formal waged economy has indeed been unable to meet the demand for jobs or breakdown sexual and cultural divisions despite years of equal opportunity and affirmative action legislation. Figure 12 indicates the persistence of traditional sexual demarcations between occupations.

**Figure 12 Occupation by Sex, 1996-2001, Campbelltown**

Three quarters of Campbelltown’s female employees work in clerical, sales, service, trades and labouring jobs. For Campbelltown women only slight improvements have occurred in the range of jobs open to them compared to previous generations. The capitalist mode of production continues to fail in the provision of rewarding and secure occupations for working class women.

Like their foremothers, Campbelltown’s working class women typically face low paid and insecure working class jobs with bleak prospects and a lack of worker autonomy. The myth of class mobility through education held little sway among the interviewees. For example, Sandra resented the years of extra educational work and money required to get the same jobs as her foremothers:

…They had it so good in the fifties and sixties and seventies until all the recessions… The early generations had it so easy… I tell

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51 ABS, 1996a, X24; ABS, 2001a, B27.
52 ABS, 1996a, X24 and ABS, 2001a, B27.
[my daughter] you just can’t leave at Year 10 … I think people have to have so much education to get these jobs that they expect to start at the top, whereas you’ve got to start at the bottom… Horin has argued many people do not come out ahead from the time and cost involved in chasing credentials. 53 Nine of the eleven respondents had attained post-secondary qualifications at significant personal cost. Nonetheless, all but two were employed in insecure and low paid work. The channeling of more people into the education system conceals the incapacity of capital to absorb the growing labour force while wasting their intelligence, creativity and time, in often-puerile distractions, when genuine social needs go unaddressed. 54

Significant inefficiencies are further generated by the capitalist organisation of the industrial geography. The Campbelltown economy is only capable of absorbing 56% of the Campbelltown/Camden workforce. 55 However, 30% (15,000) of these jobs go to non-residents, while 62% (44,000) of the Campbelltown/Camden labour force travel out of the district for work. 56 Given working class women typically obtain lower paid jobs, the cost of travel and care for any dependents makes it financially impractical for many to travel outside the district for work.

Apart from the pollution and congestion created by 61,000 commuters each day, the theft of worker’s time is immense.\textsuperscript{57} If each of these workers spends five more hours per week in traffic than if they worked locally, the combined wastage of time and life is 15.8 million hours per year. This is the equivalent labour time of 8133 full-time workers of which capital has no need. More importantly, this time is stolen from personal, family and community well-being and political organisation, time wastage working class women can ill-afford.\textsuperscript{58}

Given the proportion of Campbelltown adults who do not draw on the formal labour market for an income, the state plays an essential role in sustaining much of the population. As indicated above the formal labour market provides income to 49\% of Campbelltown’s female population, a quarter of whom (12\%) work for the state; this does not include the proportion of private sector workers whose employment is underwritten by government contracts.\textsuperscript{59} Centrelink provides direct income support to 27\% of the adult population, though it is likely to be higher for women given their over-


\textsuperscript{59} ABS, 2001a, B26.
representation amongst the poor. In sum, private capital provides some income to 37% of Campbelltown women and the state provisions at least 39%.

These figures suggest 24% (13,300) of Campbelltown women receive no official income from the state or private capital. A large section would include those employed within the informal labour market and those dependent on the family for survival. The nature and extent of the informal economy has yet to be extensively researched, though the Australian Tax Research Foundation reported the ‘black’ economy has continued to expand despite (and perhaps because of) the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax; its inflationary impact may well have forced more people to meet their material needs outside the formal economy.

As examined in the next chapter, the interviews revealed evidence of a diverse underground economy ranging from outwork to prostitution and drug dealing. Conflict between local and state government over the location of brothels provide some indication of an underground economy attempting to establish itself in the formal arena. One interviewee, Robyn, testified to knowing fellow University of Western Sydney students who were engaged informally in prostitution to help pay their way

61 12% of official waged workers plus 27% on income support.
62 ABS, 2001a, B01. The equivalent percentage for the whole adult population is 18%, that is, 20,000 residents.
64 Tremain, 1999, 6.
through their studies. Twelve women were prosecuted for prostitution in Campbelltown in 2003.\textsuperscript{65} Knowledge of the local drug economy was common amongst interviewees. Heather, a local community worker, assisted working class women suffering from drug addiction and their children on a daily basis. Deidre daily observed the street drug trade from her office window:

…I used to look out on Queen St and I used to watch every Friday the drug deals going down and 95\% of them were young girls. You know you’re just horrified. I used to call the police and it would take them at least 45 minutes to get round there. It’s an absolute joke. They know the deals are going on. … [The dealers] go from Macarthur Square to Campbelltown and they rotate and the cops know that, as well as I do.\textsuperscript{66}

There is a long history of police officers having an instrumental part in the informal drug economy in New South Wales and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{67} There were 71 convictions for drug trafficking/dealing/cultivation and 301 for possession/use in Campbelltown in 2003.\textsuperscript{68} The extent of working class women’s involvement in these underground activities is difficult to determine from official statistics.\textsuperscript{69} Qualitative evidence discussed in the next chapter suggests a diverse informal economy exists in tandem with the formal economy and that working class women are integral to its operation.\textsuperscript{70} Their involvement either as


\textsuperscript{66}The police station is two blocks from Deidre’s office.


\textsuperscript{68}BOCSAR, 2003, 2. These figures were 62 and 300 respectively in 1999.


workers or consumers is indicative of the failure of the formal economy to meet their needs.

The state drives working class women into the unpaid informal economy. Centrelink and government contracted employment agencies encourage the jobless to perform unpaid labour as a way of securing a paid position. For example, five female residents were able to set up a worker cooperative on the basis of a Department of Housing contract for the upkeep of the Minto public housing grounds and gardens. They ‘earned’ the payment after years of doing the job for nothing.71 In the present study, Robyn and Gina resorted to performing substantial amounts of unpaid labour to avoid the unemployment roundabout. Robyn was encouraged to improve her job prospects by undertaking unpaid work, while simultaneously looking for paid work (the time-consuming and costly nature of which is often ignored.72 Gina worked unpaid in community services for years but wearied of the exploitation. She came to realise they would never fund positions while ever people could be found to do it for free. Others come under the direct compulsion of ‘mutual obligation’ requirements in exchange for their meagre livelihood; the main purpose being to discipline the labour force by stigmatising and degrading the unemployed. The state and its agencies corralled these women into performing the jobs private capital was unable to extract a profit from, if workers had to be paid a decent wage.

72 For example, the costs of travel, childcare, clothing, and resume/application preparation expected of applicants for the most routine jobs today are beyond the means of the poor. Moreover, the work involved in preparing two applications per week (a minimum expectation of Newstart recipients), maintaining a dole diary, obtaining suitable attire and travel, alongside other household responsibilities are onerous for those without access to vehicles, computers, photocopiers, fax machines, telephones, or reliable public transport. Looking for work under these circumstances is a full-time job.
The dispensability of so much labour under capitalism and its uneven and wasteful distribution of resources have produced sharp class demarcations and instability within Campbelltown. As shown in Figure 13, the private gated community of Macquarie Links and the ‘prestige’ suburb of Glen Alpine enjoy high levels of employment.

**Figure 13 Waged Employment in Selected Campbelltown Suburbs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suburb</th>
<th>Percentage of 15-65 year olds in waged employment</th>
<th>Percentage of 15-65 year olds in full-time waged employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macquarie Links</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glen Alpine</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macquarie Fields</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airds</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the bottom of this spectrum, public housing dominated suburbs like Airds are deeply marginalised from the labour market and register unemployment rates (30.1%) akin to those in underdeveloped nations. Correspondingly, Glen Alpine recorded 1142.02 and Airds 595.05 on the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage.

Making up the majority of the adult population in lower income suburbs, working class women bear the brunt of these inequities and the social and political conflicts they

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74 DOTARS, 2003, 43.

75 DOTARS, 2003, 33. The Australian mean is 1000.00. A higher number indicates greater than average advantage and a lower number indicates greater than average disadvantage.
perpetuate.\footnote{ABS, 2001b, B01; ABS, 2001d, B01; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2001g. Census 2001: Basic Community Profile - Claymore. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, B01.} Figure 14 shows 51% of women and 32% of men earn less than the local median income of $300-$399/week.

**Figure 14 Weekly Individual Income (15 years or over), Campbelltown, 2001\footnote{ABS, 2001a, B13. Not stated and overseas visitors excluded.}**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nil/Negative</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3698</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-39</td>
<td>1097</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-79</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>858</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-119</td>
<td>2221</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>976</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120-159</td>
<td>3020</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>2099</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>160-199</td>
<td>4859</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>3469</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200-299</td>
<td>7216</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>3541</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300-399</td>
<td>5744</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>2996</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400-499</td>
<td>5101</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>3849</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-599</td>
<td>4274</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>4896</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600-699</td>
<td>3189</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>4289</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700-799</td>
<td>2253</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>3923</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800-999</td>
<td>2309</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>5324</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000-1499</td>
<td>1634</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>5694</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500+</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1839</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the other end of the income scale, four times the number of men to women earns over $1000 per week. Women have rarely been able to rely on a male breadwinner. The financial imperative for every adult, particularly women, to secure their own source of income has increased with the decline in real wages since the 1970s.\footnote{Palat, R. A. 1998. "Up the Down Staircase: Australasia in the 'Pacific Century'." Thesis Eleven, 55, November, 35; Aarons, L. 1999. Casino Oz: Winners and Losers in Global Capitalism. Goanna Publishing, Sydney, 59-60; Meredith, J. and Dyster, M. 1999. Australia and the Global Economy. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 285. Table 12.3.} The gap between wages and the cost of living in Campbelltown is such that at least two median income earners ($300-399/week) are required to meet basic expenses. Average mortgage
repayments are $185-230/week and rents average $150-199/week.\textsuperscript{79} Many households with two working adults struggle to earn the ‘family wage’ that one male worker was once paid.\textsuperscript{80}

The foregoing data demonstrates the inability of private capital to deliver an adequate living to Campbelltown’s population. Notwithstanding the development rhetoric of local ‘leaders’, a minority of the population relies on private enterprise for their survival. Indeed, the state provides more local women with an income than private capital. Working class women are alienated and impoverished by the inadequacies of this political economy and future developments seem set to worsen their position. The tendency of capital towards endless expansion provides no basis for an equitable, efficient or sustainable distribution of socially productive resources. As Meszaros has argued, the state plays a vital role in managing and obscuring these fundamental contradictions.\textsuperscript{81}

The more impoverished, alienated and unstable labour becomes, the greater the political significance of the relationship between private capital and the state. Paradoxically the state seeks to maintain social stability on behalf of a mode of production that undermines it. Keynesian economic theory advanced an argument that the state must

\textsuperscript{79} ABS, 1996a, X34, X35; ABS, 2001a, B33.  
\textsuperscript{81} In Singer, D. 1996. "After Alienation." \textit{The Nation}, 262, 23 (June 10), 27.
shoulder the cost of structural unemployment for political as much as economic reasons; this response presupposed the state would perform this function.\textsuperscript{82} The more capital is concentrated in private hands with the assistance of the state, the less the state has the capacity with which to maintain the established order by civil means.\textsuperscript{83} The underside of the rollback of the welfare state and the social wage is an increased leaning towards the repressive and militaristic end of its social control strategies as discussed below.

Attending to the needs of people surplus to capital’s needs was once understood as a concession to labour in the context of the Cold War. Today welfare capitalism is considered an economic and political liability by the major parties in Australia and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{84} While its decline has entailed reduced real wages for the working class, the state has also relinquished a degree of material and ideological power over them. The state’s primary allegiance to capital becomes clearer and its legitimacy as a nominally democratic institution wanes. This cold reality does not necessarily mean labour will unite in opposition; indeed it may have the opposite effect as alienation and poverty intensify.

As discussed below and in the next chapter, the state is struggling to contain the resistance of those marginalised and cut adrift from the formal political economy.

\textsuperscript{83} Frankel, B. 2001. \textit{When the Boat Comes In: Transforming Australia in the Age of Globalisation}. Pluto Press, Annandale, NSW.
Blunter methods of social control and systematic intimidation are deployed. Funiciello’s interviews with welfare-dependent American working class women illustrate their vulnerability and class fury:

You want to ring the [welfare] workers’ necks, but you don’t dare talk back. The slightest remark can set your case back hours, days, weeks, or forever. Occasionally someone loses it and starts cursing at the top of her lungs. Then she’s carted away by security guards... It’s truly amazing that more welfare workers aren’t killed; the torment so many of them inflict would break the patience of anyone whose life wasn’t on the line. But that’s always their ace in the hole. No check, no life.85

The tension at Campbelltown’s security guarded Centrelink offices (once next door to, and now around the corner from, the police station) parallel the American situation. On one occasion, interviewee Robyn was denied two weeks income for being five minutes late for an interview. She had battled panic attacks and forty minutes traffic to keep the appointment. When her friend complained about the unreasonableness of the action she was manhandled out of the building by security personnel. Robyn needed a loan from extended family to survive the duration. Deidre, another interviewee who works in a government welfare office, noted the bureaucratic nightmare of obtaining government assistance:

You’re put into a departmental house and you’re told to go to the department for this, that and the other. Every welfare cheque, you’ve got to go to this one and that one and that one - you know it’s getting a bit much. Of course, the welfare state does not have the resources to intimidate, aggravate and discourage each claimant in person.

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Foucault’s study of discipline and punishment examined strategies and principles through which under-resourced institutions maintained widespread social control. He drew particular attention to the panopticon prison as a metaphor for disciplining people with the threat of constant surveillance and imminent danger whether such a threat existed or not. A local example of this is the infamous spot checks on sole parenting payment recipients by Centrelink officers. One interviewee, Sandra, formerly a sole parent living in public housing explains:

... I had one person come out where they ‘surprise’ you with a little visit to make sure you haven’t got a man tucked under your bed… she didn’t even look in the house or anything. She just came in and … I filled in the same questions as [usual]. So I didn’t see the point…

These types of routine surveillance are less about catching ‘welfare cheats’, and more about generating a terror of state power amongst those most disadvantaged by it. These tactics are aimed at driving the working class to discipline and punish themselves.

The internalisation of work discipline and the commodification of labour alienate workers to the extent they have difficulty seeing any value in themselves when unemployed. For example, when Gina was forced to resign from her clothes packing job after developing a repetitive strain injury, her subsequent confinement to the home and return to economic dependency seemed more debilitating than the physical pain she endures:

...It’s like I lost everything ... I lost my job, I lost my independence, I lost my work, I lost my car ... I’m nothing again ... I lost contact with people ... I didn’t want to visit anybody ... have friends ... see anybody. I was very, very suicidal...

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While she disciplined her sense of self, the insurance company subjected her to intense video surveillance for several years and insisted on a demeaning round of visits to doctors and psychologists hours from home. Gina eventually succumbed to their intimidation and the personal denigration, settling for a miserly compensation payment. A study of women’s health in Macquarie Fields, a suburb with a high proportion of public housing tenants and Centrelink claimants, also reported ‘members of the community were ashamed of being unemployed’ and saw welfare recipients as ‘ripping off the system.’

The welfare state is mystified as public charity for the deserving poor, rather than a mechanism by which labour’s surplus value supports those superfluous to the needs of private capital. It has inherited the moralising righteousness of church orchestrated bestowals on the poor. Denise remembered as a child:

... the only thing we had to do with the church was ... the church dressed us from time to time. We had a lot of charity. … It was really important that outside we had to be a respectable family … we had to be clean poor … the great washed poor, cleaned and scrubbed … putting up the front…

Then, as today, the charity model underscored and obscured the inefficient and inequitable distribution of the limited employment opportunities capital struggles to generate. Today, a minimalist hard-line state is being promulgated in place of welfare

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capitalism. It is proving incapable of controlling the contradictions and destabilisation of capital accumulation.

As discussed below, signs of the state’s inability to directly suppress social conflict are growing in Campbelltown. As working class women are most removed from the benefits of the formal political economy, they are also most removed from its dictates and most adept at surviving beyond its reach. Their labours in the community and household make this possible; it is these political economic arenas that private capital and the state find most difficult to control.

**Community Structures**

This section examines the structures constraining the community labours of Campbelltown’s working class women and some of their consequences. As indicated in the previous chapter, community management work involves fighting for access and control of social resources, neighbouring and the reproduction of social values. In the case of working class women, this labour is not simply a matter of community-mindedness; it is labour essential for their own survival and for those who have been marginalised from the formal political economy. As demonstrated above, a fifth of the adult population (and a quarter of women) in Campbelltown does not receive incomes from the formal political economy and many more do not receive adequate incomes for survival. The state constructs welfare provision as a safety net to be activated only after

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the resources of working class families, households and communities are exhausted, and even then it turns its back on many.\textsuperscript{90} The state and private capital’s exploitation of working class people in the formal marketplace frames the community (and domestic) labours of working class women.

In Campbelltown indications of a divided community are etched into the built environment and the physical landscape as much as the social and economic relationships. As Anderson observed:

\begin{quote}
 Territory is a ‘map’ underlying social relations of production: it is itself a means of production, directly in agriculture, indirectly as sites for industry; and it is a consumer good in short supply, most importantly as sites for housing.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

Housing in Campbelltown is separated into class precincts. For example, the proportion of households with gross incomes less than $26,000 per annum was 6% in the suburb of Glen Alpine compared to 60% in the public housing estates of Airds and Claymore.\textsuperscript{92} In the following examination conflicts over housing and residential territory provide the main exemplars of the character of the physical and social cleavages working class women labour within and against.

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
To outsiders Campbelltown is perhaps best known (and in some cases feared) as a working class suburb with more than an average share of public housing occupied mainly by women and children.\textsuperscript{93} Over the past half century Campbelltown’s population increased seventeen-fold. An important component of this growth was large numbers of public housing tenants from inner-city suburbs through the 1960s to 1980s.\textsuperscript{94} Many working class families were relocated by public housing authorities or priced out of their long-standing neighbourhoods by property speculation and gentrification.\textsuperscript{95} For one Campbelltown woman the public housing relocations ‘…made you feel like a whole heap of cattle just being moved in.’\textsuperscript{96} Prior to the 1970s a quarter of all Australians lived in publicly provided housing without ceremony or scandal.\textsuperscript{97}

Collective cultures, memories and resources forged over a century or more were swept away and could not be instantly re-established in the remote suburban expanses of Campbelltown.\textsuperscript{98} Though precise information on the origin of these residents is unavailable, a considerable proportion arrived from working class inner Sydney

\textsuperscript{93} Powell, 1993.
\textsuperscript{94} Liston, 1988; Powell, 1993.
suburbs. Migrants, indigenous people from closed down missions and economically displaced rural residents contributed to the social mix. Deidre, Denise and Belinda all arrived from inner-middle suburbs. Deidre recalled the property developer’s promotional material used to entice low-income families to new private estates

Cheap housing, the ‘ninety day wonders’ that LJ Hooker used to put up. …From dirt to suburban community in ninety days. That’s what they used to say …It’d be cleared and bulldozed and all these concrete slabs thrown down and these boxes go up
- ninety days.

Lures of industrial development and local jobs were deceptive. The consequences were crushing for working class women, many of whom now had to make do entirely on their own, some for the first time in their lives.

By 1998 Campbelltown had the second highest proportion of public housing tenants at 16%, following Sydney Centre at 16.5%; this figure declined to 14.4% in 2001. In Airds there are 36% more women than men amongst residents (fifteen years old or over). In this suburb, working class women care for 92% of families with dependents (40% with partners and 52% alone). Women comprise 72% of lone person

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104 ABS, 2001b, B14. Excluding dependent students 15 years old and over. 97% of occupied dwellings in Airds are state housing rental properties (ABS, 2001b, B19).
105 Calculated from ABS, 2001b, B14 and B17. In comparison, men were involved in the care of 46% of families with dependents (40% with partners and 6% alone). Moreover, women from the more affluent Glen Alpine care for 97% of families with dependents (93% with partners and 4% alone) (ABS, 2001c,
households. When compared to the mixed public and private housing suburb of Macquarie Fields and the more affluent suburb of Glen Alpine, it is clear the poorer the suburb, the greater women’s share of household and community care becomes.

State housing, once a pillar of welfare capitalism, is now seen as a millstone and obstacle to capital accumulation. The factors that originally displaced thousands of working class people from their longstanding inner-city homes are being revisited on the current generation of public housing tenants in Campbelltown. Having gentrified most of the inner-city, property developers are turning their attention to the suburbs. Scarce and lucrative outer suburban property no longer offers a cheap or politic solution to the scourge of poverty and the sheltering of low-income women and children, in Sydney’s homelands.

The Radburn ‘back to front’ housing and community design was intended to beautify, control and camouflage Sydney’s working classes and acculturate them to middle-class

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B14 and B17). In the mixed public and private housing suburb of Macquarie Fields women care for 92% of families with dependents (59% with partners and 33% alone) (ABS, 2001d, B14 and B17).


107 In conjunction with Footnote 105, the proportion of families earning over $500/week provides some indication of the class and gender differences between these suburbs: Airds (44%), Macquarie Fields (60%) and Glen Alpine (81%) (ABS, 2001b, B31; ABS, 2001c, B31; ABS, 2001d, B31). These figures overstate the financial position of most female headed households. In Airds, for example, only 22% of lone parent families (of whom 90% are headed by women) earned over $500/week (ABS, 2001b, B14 and B30).


mores, as explained below.\textsuperscript{111} The dismal failure of this social experiment has provided the state with a convenient excuse to bulldoze public housing estates, notwithstanding a waiting list in excess of 95,000 households.\textsuperscript{112} In their place private property developers cater to a clientele that demands a homogenous class landscape (or at least the appearance of it), cleansed of the Radburn poorhouses.\textsuperscript{113}

As experienced by previous generations of state housing tenants, it is not weatherboards and fibro-sheeting being bulldozed; whole communities and survival networks are being destroyed. While Sandra, a former public housing resident, acknowledges the hardships and disadvantage experienced by tenants, her memories were of an unduly maligned community:

I’ve lived in housing commission areas and I never had any problems whatsoever… You say Claymore …and people are just like ‘oh my god!’…it looks like a hell hole but I had not one problem there at all.

Many families and elderly people have resided in these estates for over thirty years and while some are happy to relocate, others have formed action groups to resist them or at least minimise the distress it causes.\textsuperscript{114}

A range of factors drove the decline in acceptability of public housing and their tenants. Developer-driven suburbanisation and middle-class pretensions for private property

\textsuperscript{111} Walliss, 1998, 929-934.
ownership flourished while all other forms of tenure, such as boarding houses and renting were demonised. In the new moral schema, public housing could only be a halfway house or ‘stepping stone’, not a home or a community. The state justified its previous large-scale dislocation of public housing and encouragement of low-income private housing by arguing the clean and spacious environs of the western suburbs would be the salvation of the working class.

Wallis noted the ‘neo-Radburn’ design of the new public housing estates in Western Sydney was influenced by economic stringencies as much as middle class predilections to morally (though not materially) enrich and assimilate their class subordinates. The cash-strapped Housing Commission faced enormous tenant demand in the post war period, and still does. In part, the Radburn design responded to urban consolidation pressures: ‘… attached housing was considered a more economical use of land and infrastructure than detached houses.’ Marketers and designers unsuccessfully attempted to conceal the miserly yard sizes by emphasising the ‘free flowing landscape[s] … [that] incorporated … common open space.’ Private yards for children’s play, a source of respite for their mothers, food gardening to supplement paltry state benefits, or other social and physical activities were luxuries Sydney’s working class women did apparently not deserve.

115 Hall, 1995.
118 The original Radburn design was adopted in the United States in the 1920s. The post-war rediscovery of the urban layout was based around ‘back to front’ yards, so that the bulk of the outdoor area was not fenced in but faced onto a common cul-de-sac area.
120 Walliss, 1998, 931.
Attached dwellings for the working classes were nothing new, what was novel was the ‘common open space’ instead of the traditional enclosed back yard; a traditionally vital resource for working class women and men.\textsuperscript{122} The new open space was planned neither for private or family use, nor did it foster community activities in a park-like setting with seating, play equipment, barbecues or sporting facilities. Did planners believe the mere existence of open space would foster community harmony; or was their planning based on the expectation of conflict?

It is unlikely planners did not have some purpose in mind for these spaces given the financial constraints facing the Commission and the militant enforcement of publicly visible front-to-back yards. A 1963 \textit{Daily Telegraph} article reported: ‘To maintain this open-garden atmosphere, no-one will be allowed to erect a fence or any type of structure in front of the house.’\textsuperscript{123} According to tenants’ exit evaluations, the resultant ‘left over’ open space was wasted in resource-starved neighbourhoods. The commons had no obvious functional role and ‘people were restricted in achieving privacy and modifying their homes.’\textsuperscript{124} In 1994, Huxley suggested the ‘garden’ suburb of Macquarie Fields was far from Eden:

\begin{quote}
...although the planners pretty pattern was followed, many of the estates’ supposed features have since become flash points. Neighbours dispute boundary lines; residents complain of noise from those using the pedestrian ways or ‘hanging about’ on the village greens and tenants feel
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{122} Walliss, 1998, 931.  
\textsuperscript{123} Cited in Walliss, 1998, 930.  
\textsuperscript{124} Walliss, 1998, 931.
themselves crowded into the end of cul-de-sacs. They want fences rather than freedom of movement.\textsuperscript{125}

Huxley overlooks the possibility residents wanted privacy \textit{and} freedom of movement. He explains neighbourhood conflict and fear as stemming from poor urban design rather than the alienating and dehumanising effects of poverty on social relations.\textsuperscript{126} Recent ‘neighbourhood improvement programs’ have added fences and created private spaces for some residents as part of the Department’s value adding stage in preparing public housing stock for private sale to a market prepared to pay for privacy and security.

Is it coincidental Radburn keyhole designed neighbourhoods are predominantly used to house the poor? Dowler argues it was introduced in the Divis Flats in West Belfast to replace standard detached housing that had ‘posed logistic difficulties for police surveillance [as the Radburn design was] … a condensed, easily monitored structure, prompting residents to view it as a prison.’\textsuperscript{127} The design encourages neighbours to informally keep watch on each other and assists the state to monitor the working class. Campbelltown police have realised its tactical advantage. In 1999, special squads of motorcycle police, capable of negotiating the walkway riddled common open spaces, were introduced.\textsuperscript{128} Yet for many residents, vigilant streetscapes have not fostered a sense of security, wellbeing or harmony amongst tenants,\textsuperscript{129} indeed they appear to have had the reverse effect.

\textsuperscript{125} Huxley cited in Walliss, 1998, 931.
\textsuperscript{126} MHS, 2000.
\textsuperscript{129} Luckett, 1994; King, 1998.
The crucial spatial feature of Radburn estates is minimal control by tenants and maximum surveillance of tenants. The panoptic cul-de-sacs enable intensive policing for the least effort and expense.\textsuperscript{130} In Radburn estates the central physical vantage point of these open ‘common’ spaces allows authorities to scrutinise all external activities without warrants. The vegie patches, backyard bookies, makeshift lean-tos, ‘pot’ plants and illegal tenants of inner-city working class neighbourhoods are all but banished from Radburn suburbs. For working class women the new housing not only removed many from old support networks, it restricted their ability to carry on the various informal economic and mutual aid practices that sustained their communities for generations.

Urban planning as a form of legitimised territorial occupation reflects the struggles between conflicting social groups.\textsuperscript{131} That people living in Campbelltown’s Radburn estates have remained poor, alienated, frightened, and disorganised over forty years is a sign of success for those who dread an organised and harmonious working class. Social control is figured into urban planning and to this extent Radburn designs and their like have worked well for the constabulary, if not the residents. Both major parties have prioritised policing the poor, regularly outbidding each others ‘law and order’ platforms at election time. The ALP’s hand in state housing, particularly its demolition (rather than improvement) of stock, indicates how little working class constituents figure in its political priorities.

\textsuperscript{130} Foucault, 1995 [1977].
These actions have progressively diluted the working class vote in Campbelltown, which was once a safe Labor seat. Airds, for example, is now an isolated ALP booth in the Liberal seat of Macarthur. While public housing tenants have been continually failed by both major parties, the dispersal of public housing will decimate some of the strongest anti-conservative voting blocs in the country. For example in 1998, the two party preferred Labor vote in the female dominated public housing suburbs of Claymore (82%) and Airds North (85%), well above the national average of 51%. Registering disenchantment with the political process and the ALP in particular these figures dropped in the 2004 election to 61% and 67% respectively; these figures were still well above the national average of 47%. By blending public housing tenants amongst private estates, not only are the poor tucked away from sight, it also destroys their collective electoral voice in the only formal act of democracy open to them. On a general level, destruction of public housing estates conceals the collective disempowerment of people superfluous to capital’s requirements, undermining awareness of, and responses to, shared struggles.

Today it is argued the poor will find salvation by living next door to better (off) people. This ignores the evidence that homeowner cliques often exclude renters from

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neighbourhood networks.\textsuperscript{136} The class exclusion directed at Campbelltown’s workers in general is also overlooked. As Deidre noted:

The worst thing I’d say [about living in Campbelltown is] … you’re basically put down if you say … where you live. ‘Where’s Raby, sounds like a bloody disease.’ I say it’s in between Liverpool and Campbelltown. ‘Oh, out near Camden?’ Yeah okay, out near there. It’s just that stigma Campbelltown has got. Like Blacktown and Seven Hills and all around there, Parklea. … you go for an interview in the city and you say you’re from Campbelltown … You’re basically out the door aren’t you.

The fundamental issue that many public housing tenants are impoverished is not because of their geographical location or housing density, but because they are surplus to the requirements of capital and constantly subject to institutionalised and systematic class prejudice.

Some are interested in portraying Campbelltown as a city that has left its class baggage behind and is now a secure place in which to live and invest.\textsuperscript{137} The middle classes, professionals and executives, have safeguarded themselves in the hills of Campbelltown in ‘premier’ suburbs such as Glen Alpine, Denham Court, Blair Athol and Macquarie Links. While working class women in Macquarie Fields paid $50-$199 per week for public housing, 500 metres across the railway tracks and past the country club a Macquarie Links home replete with Jacuzzi, pool and gourmet kitchen rents for $900 per week.\textsuperscript{138} In 2001, 24% of monthly loan repayments in Macquarie Fields were over

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$1200 compared to 84% in Macquarie Links.\textsuperscript{139} Houses prices start at $190,000 in Macquarie Fields compared to $650,000 in Macquarie Links.\textsuperscript{140} Across the road from the remnants of the Minto public housing estate, acreages fetch $720,000.\textsuperscript{141} Wealthier residents show no hint of embracing Campbelltown’s ‘class diversity’.

All too aware that class divisions cannot be wished, bulldozed or dispersed away, Campbelltown’s elite adopt strategies to cocoon themselves from the ‘dangerous masses.’ The geographical placement of these suburbs provides residents access to highway exits, train stations and the CBD while saving them from ever having to encounter a housing commission district. While the Minto millionaires take their chances with tenants from ‘the flats’ (often from behind high fences, security cameras, alarm systems and guard dogs), the residents of Campbelltown’s first gated community, Macquarie Links, are ‘protected’ by strict building regulations on land and building size and materials and ‘a 24 hour security concierge.’\textsuperscript{142} Residents pay for private policing of who can live in, and pass through, the suburb. Pitched as ‘more of a country club than a community’ by its developers, investors are assured there will be no encroachments on their exclusive territory.\textsuperscript{143} Like similar ‘privatopias’ ringing Sydney’s outer fringe they

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{139} ABS, 2001d, B20; ABS, 2001e, B20.
\textsuperscript{143} Monarch Investments, 2003.
\end{footnotesize}
meet the middle class ‘desire to be with people like themselves.’ Gwyther notes the experiences in an exclusive suburb in the neighbouring Camden LGA:

Places like Harrington Park have been sold to a particular group of middle-class people who want to escape that sort of [cross-class] suburbanism and they’re willing to pay the money to move into a place that they feel is more secure and they’re able to connect with the people there.

The developments are emblematic of the creeping social and spatial apartheid between rich and poor as the more affluent attempt to buy their way out of the consequences of social inequality and suffering.

Underscoring these developments is an implicit middle class recognition that the state is unable to protect them from the social fallout of capitalism. Residency of these estates saves homeowners from mixing with the working classes to obtain conventional public services. Rather, they jointly own neighbourhood facilities like pools, golf clubs, tennis courts, 24-hour security patrols and have representation on their own neighbourhood ‘mini-councils.’ It is a political development that has alarmed some who see it as undermining the role of local government, while others have hailed it as a new era in locally responsive democracy. As with any user pays system, it represents ‘democracy’ for sale and it responds to class power.

In Campbelltown suburbs without fortifications and private sentries, more affluent homeowners directly oppose class integration to preserve their sense of safety and the

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146 Anonymous. 2001c. “Going to the Wall … Urban Resorts or Residential Apartheid.” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9th March, 5. Davis (1990) examines the patterns and social consequences of more advanced stages of this kind of development on the suburban fringe of Los Angeles.
147 Verity, 2002.
value of their main asset, the family home. The proposed construction of a footbridge over a four-lane freeway, to allow Claymore residents safe access to the city’s resources, met stiff opposition, including petitions, from Woodbine residents fearful of ‘criminals’ accessing their suburb.\(^{148}\) Inadequate public transport causes many Claymore residents to risk darting across the freeway. When in 1999 a 12-year-old boy did not make the crossing, Woodbine residents stood firm in their objections; there is still no footbridge. Glen Alpine residents similarly objected to the opening of a road that would directly link their suburb to lower-income and public housing sections of Ambarvale.\(^{149}\) These internal ‘border protection’ struggles are expressions of the growing social divide in Campbelltown and of middle class efforts to enforce their sovereignty over the local geography and working classes.

Population growth projections indicate conflict over scarce land and housing is set to intensify. The Campbelltown population stabilised in recent years with a net increase of 2087 (1.5%) residents between 1996 and 2001. The suburban sprawl has advanced into the neighbouring local government areas of Camden and Wollondilly.\(^{150}\) However, in 2002, NSW Premier Bob Carr announced 380 hectares of open space at Menangle Park in the south of City of Campbelltown, will be converted into 3500 homes.\(^{151}\) Official estimates indicate the Macarthur region population will grow by 26.8% (56000) between 2001 and 2016.\(^{152}\) As the key regional employment and commercial centre,


\(^{150}\) Liston, 1988, 226; ABS, 1996b, B01; ABS 2001b, B01.


\(^{152}\) DOTARS, 2003, 16.
Campbelltown residents will continue to experience the pressures of regional population increases on their local resources and environment.

Most significantly these developments are inflating the cost of living.\textsuperscript{153} As originally noted by Stilwell, the unsustainable centralisation of resources and population in the Sydney basin is gradually exhausting available and affordable residential and commercial space.\textsuperscript{154} With this crowding out comes increasing competition between more and less powerful sections of the population, which in turn forces new demographic shifts. Class conflict over housing echoes the wider battles over all community resources.

As with housing, class relations indelibly impact on the distribution and accessibility of community support, services and networks. Working class women must survive in a community environment that is increasingly shaped by the processes of privatisation and commodification. As Sandra points out

\begin{quote}
\ldots you have low-income people that don't have a lot of money left to spend on their kids… so their children don't really have a choice of what to do, so they wander the streets at night... They haven't got enough free type things for the kids to do here. Everything costs money. Sports cost money.
\end{quote}

A recent report on the position of Campbelltown women caring for children with disabilities is examined below as a clear example of the consequences of a user-pays society on working class women.\textsuperscript{155} What they are unable to pay for monetarily, they

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{153} MACROC (2004, 17) reported Sydney house prices increased by 100\% between 1996 and 2003, while weekly earnings rose by 3.6\% per annum over the same period.
\textsuperscript{154} Stilwell, 1974.
\end{footnotesize}
often pay for with their health and well-being. Moreover, those who are not in a position to pay, who do not consume, are increasingly criminalised.

Not only do working class women in Campbelltown struggle to find satisfactory employment and housing; accessing basic public services takes up considerable time, energy and money. Deidre, who also worked for a social services department, explained the poor servicing of working class neighbourhoods:

…there a lot of families out there that don’t have the support, that don’t know the structures, that don’t know enough of what services are available and that’s part of the Department’s problem. Apparently Claymore is getting a new neighbourhood centre and that’s going to have all the services in it, so that you don’t have to go to [Centrelink] … and the housing department, you can do it all in one building … but it’s taken a long time to get there. …out here needs welfare skills and life support sort of stuff, neighbourhood centres … just basic places kids can go.

Coping with, and fighting against, the absence of essential community resources like transport, telephones, bus shelters, affordable shopping and safe recreational facilities absorb much of working class women’s labour.

The paucity of public services in working class neighbourhoods is not just a reflection of the substandard material position of residents, but a factor compounding their poverty. King’s study of Airds, for example, noted inadequate childcare and transport as factors contributing to sole parents’ inability to obtain employment or training.\footnote{King, 1998, 8.} Unlike wealthier inner-city suburbs, Campbelltown’s working classes must deal with a privatised bus service and a two-tiered childcare industry that caters foremost to higher income families. In 1997, community based childcare provided for 610 of the 13000
local children under the age of five.\textsuperscript{157} In 2002-03 local council facilities cared for 1850 local children per week in 18 local centres.\textsuperscript{158} According to Millward, there is three times the number of childcare places in inner urban suburbs than outer urban suburbs like Campbelltown.\textsuperscript{159} It is far easier, and typical, for working class women to be accused of ‘ripping off the system’ than for the interconnections between the political economies of the formal economy, the community and the household to be recognised.\textsuperscript{160} Moreover, the role of the state and private capital in the reproduction of their impoverishment often escapes critical scrutiny.

For low-income Campbelltown mothers of children with disabilities the vacuum of services can be lethal; the following passages explore their experiences, as recorded by the author in a separate study.\textsuperscript{161} The report found low-income parents (predominantly women) with children with disabilities receive little public assistance in their constant duties.\textsuperscript{162} Community accommodation is provided for 19\% of people with intellectual disabilities and less than 10\% of people with other kinds of disabilities.\textsuperscript{163} While a quarter to a third of people with disabilities lives alone (depending on support needs), the majority live with their spouse or family. Crisis assistance can be just as difficult to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[158] CCC, 2003a, 10.
\item[160] King, 1998.
\item[161] Gill, et al., 2004.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
obtain. In one fruitless bid for emergency respite during a family crisis, a local woman admitted she feared harming her daughter:

…I remember one day ringing up [a local respite service] in tears saying: ‘I have to have a break from her, it has to be like now.’ I really couldn’t wait too much longer, but three days later they got back to me and said: ‘oh we can get her in by the end of the week.’ …the thing that really, really got me at the time was, well what sort of emergency do you need to get help …within twenty-four hours. … I had to get away before I hurt her. I just could not stand being near her. … I really find it hard to believe that in the DADHC [NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care] services that there couldn’t have been something organised.164

Knowing the state rarely responds even in times of crisis, sometimes parents leave their children in respite indefinitely. Many respondents referred to the number of ‘blocked beds’ in respite centres, a euphemism for children from devastated families. For some mother’s the pressure becomes unbearable, as in the recent case of infanticide and attempted suicide by a sole mother.165 None of the respondents expressed any negative judgments of this event, rather they were understanding and apprehensive, given their own circumstances are not dissimilar.

Coping with a social system that inadequately supports families experiencing disabilities involves working class women in an inordinate amount of community labour. They face a mountain of form filling to secure the most minimal of services.166 In the words of one participant:

164 One respondent remarked: ‘… there is just nothing around, no carers to take them, no where for them to go and it really is very, very difficult for … the family. Like a single mum with a child in a wheelchair, like she has no social life, no nothing, very difficult … You get tired and it does reflect back on the care of the child’ (Gill, et. Al., 2004).


166 One parent commented: ‘So each service provider has forms to fill in, medication forms to fill in then they are reviewed continually once every twelve months. That’s another lot of ongoing forms … because I am using so many services I’ve had to keep a diary whenever I’m on the phone talking to people, so I
… it’s a struggle all the time constantly nagging and whinging and then there’s transport and it just gives you the shits. Like you get sick of it.\textsuperscript{167}

Working class women’s complaints are an important and undervalued mechanism of political comment; an everyday resistance fraught with danger when directed at the state.

Working class women take considerable risks of reprisal from state officials vested with the power to destroy their lives. As mentioned above, the stakes are so high in these volatile confrontations that Centrelink has militarised its Campbelltown offices with security guards and cameras. One mother explained her terror of dealing with Centrelink:

I said to the person at Centrelink at that time, is there anything else I could apply for. … Now this Centrelink person knew at the time that there was a carers allowance, but he said no. He had decided to …not tell me. So I have gone all this time without it. Now I’ve had so many problems with Centrelink. …I’ve got to build up my self esteem before I even go down there to hand a form over. They are so confronting, so arrogant. Just recently, [my children] are continually being reviewed, over and over again and it becomes very draining. Recently I was handing in a mobility form with one of my sons, he was standing next to me and I was asked four times, are you his mother? He looked at the form, turned it over, are you his mother? Looked at the form and turned it over, are you his mother? I thought now if he says it again, I’ll show him my scare, I mean you shouldn’t have to go through this intimidation just to apply for a mobility allowance for your son.

Another mother had to go through an appeals process to receive the correct entitlements.

She explained the vulnerability of her material circumstances to the whims of the state:

\[\text{won’t forget what I’ve told one and the other and then they’ll come back and say, no you didn’t say this and I have to say yes I have, I’ve got the time and the date, this is what I said.’}\] Another parent remarked: ‘… I can’t stand paperwork, … I’ve got paperwork from post school options, … I’ve got paperwork from respite. … I shouldn’t whinge about it, but it is actually quite a burden’ (Gill, et. al., 2004).

\textsuperscript{167} Gill, et. al., 2004.
They wouldn’t give me the carer’s [pension], they just put me on a widows [pension] because they felt that [my daughter] didn’t need care twenty-four hours. I said that I did. … they do not understand these sort of children. … I mightn’t have to make her go to the toilet, but I have to supervise her all the time…

Implicit in their dealings with many service providers is the suggestion that their poverty or child’s disability is through some fault of their own or that they are trying to ‘cheat the system’. The emotional toll is as heavy as the material implications; many reported feelings of being judged, punished, and of feeling insignificant and worthless.

The health of these mothers was appalling, which they attributed to their private shouldering of this public health issue. Without community support, most simply battle on until they collapse. As examined in the following section, many of the mothers in this report were convinced the stress and isolation of their private unpaid caring work was a contributing factor in their own ill-health.

All the respondents realised that it was women who cared for children with disabilities and that lower income women faced specific issues.\textsuperscript{168} In the context of a two-tier health and education system and inadequate funding for public services, lower income women could not afford specialised or extra health care and education for their children. Access to transport, housing, quality food and social involvement were also restricted in working class families. Parents who were home owners/mortgagees had the option of bequeathing the family home to their children once they were no longer able to care for them. Families in rental properties faced a lifetime of uncertainty and indifference about what would happen to their disabled children when the parents died or were

\textsuperscript{168} Gill, et. al., 2004.
incapacitated, given the paucity of supported accommodation. A ‘better off’ respondent explained that she and her husband needed to work full-time to pay for private health cover, speech and occupational therapy, private respite services and a host of other expenses relating to her child’s condition. This mother was anxious about what would happen to her daughter once she reached post-school age, at which point many public services cease. This parent knew she would have to leave work to care for her daughter and that the material and emotional well-being of the family would suffer.

Indigenous women’s claims on health services are hindered by institutional racism. An earlier study of families experiencing disabilities in Campbelltown reported indigenous parents feared seeking help as it had previously been used as a pretext for state removal of their children. One Airds grandmother, who cared for her daughter, believed accessing community services would be seen as an admission of being unable to cope, by authorities.

The experiences of working class women caring for children with disabilities underscored the government’s disinterest in their well-being and by extension the plight of disadvantaged people generally. One mother who had no confidence the ‘system’ would provide adequate care for her son once she was no longer able to stated:

… there’s not a day goes past in my life when I don’t think, what’s going to happen to [my son] when he gets older and I can say now that if something happens to me, I will take [him] with me. If I know that I’m going to die I will take him with me and I don’t care what anybody says and you’ll

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find that a lot of my friends have the same opinion. I couldn’t leave him if there was nothing there for him, I’d rather take him with me.

These women know they will probably face decades of struggle to get any assurances of their child’s future well-being.

Most of the women involved in the Campbelltown disabilities study had formed into an activist network in response to their collective experiences of disadvantage as working class women caring for children with disabilities. One participant stated that she battled alone in her private world with these overwhelming difficulties for many years, convinced that it was her personal problem to cope with. A chance meeting with several women in a similar position enabled her to re-frame her experiences in a social and political context and to tap into the informal community care networks that can make the difference between coping and intolerable suffering.

Working class women’s claims on the state are an indirect call for the transfer of capital from private coffers to public needs. As the state is structured to achieve the reverse process, it must convince the public of the impossibility of their claims. Lamentations over financial shortages is the usual strategy. Yet, signs of state expenditure according to middle class sensibilities and the dictates of private capital abound. No doubt the women above would have preferred to see the $6.7 million local council spent last year upgrading the art gallery to attract tourists, spent on respite and accommodation


171 Gill, et. al., 2004.
services. Rather than wasting the capabilities of working class unemployed people to clean up graffiti, they might have been given real jobs that help families and young people out with real problems. Meanwhile, Council opened a new office, library, café and gymnasium in Eagle Vale Central, when parents in neighbouring Claymore cannot afford to send their kids to the local pool. Airds residents know the recent spate of neighbourhood improvement programs apply cosmetic gloss over deep-seated social structural problems. While Airds residents get a new coat of paint, Telstra refused to maintain the Claymore public phone system after a series of destroyed booths. In the public housing suburb of Claymore private phones are beyond the reach of many households. Telstra’s policy effectively criminalised and punished a whole community. They only installed a new booth when local women agreed to safeguard the facility.

The growing privatisation and commodification of community space registers capital’s encroachment on working class territory beyond the formal political economy. Davis noted in his study of Los Angeles that ensuring the wealth and security of the middle and upper classes was spawning the ‘militarization of city life so grimly visible at the street level.’ Signs of this process are evident in Campbelltown. As previously mentioned, the first ‘fortress’ community has been established. There is increasing expenditure on private security, state surveillance and police. In response to local business demands, Campbelltown’s main street has recently been revamped to thwart

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172 CCC, 2003a, 15.
173 CCC, 2003a, 15.
174 CCC, 2003a, 2.
175 King, 1998.
176 Webber, 1999a, 1-2; Webber, 1999b, 1-2.
177 Davis, 1990, 223.
Special squads of motorcycle police have been introduced to the City. Private security guards and cameras patrol all local shopping precincts, train stations, and the Centrelink office. Industrial premises are encased with high-voltage fencing and guarded boom-gates. Wire cages box in all highway overpasses between Liverpool and Campbelltown to prevent rocks being thrown on the freeway below. Campbelltown is home to a periodic detention centre and the Reiby Juvenile Justice Centre. Public schools in Airds, Minto and Claymore are ringed with high barbed wire fencing.

While these moves may have reduced burglaries and motor vehicle thefts (though still amongst the state’s highest levels), there has been a corresponding increase in crimes involving softer targets such as retail stores and individuals. Apart from driving offences, crimes of poverty and alienation are commonplace; that is, property damage, theft/robbery and assault. The City Council argues the fear of crime expressed in a local survey is out of step with the statistical evidence. The middle class panic over personal security is largely unfounded, but constantly stressed.

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181 McGill, J., Fowler, V. and Richardson, K. 1995. Campbelltown’s Streets and Suburbs – How and Why They Got Their Names. Campbelltown and Airds Historical Society, Campbelltown, NSW. The centre was originally the Mary Reiby School which was ‘opened in 1973 as an institution for delinquent girls, was called after a famous convict girl who arrived at Sydney in chains, yet went on to achieve great success and wealth...’ (McGill, et al., 1995, 27).
On the other hand, the threat of crime against Campbelltown’s working class, particularly women, is palpable. A study by the Macarthur Health Service found working class women from Macquarie Fields were often isolated and intimidated:

… to maintain personal safety it was important to ‘mind your own business’. Some women stated that they were fearful about making social contact with others for this reason. … Relationships with neighbours … appeared to be frequently conflictive, involving verbal and physical violence towards women and children.\textsuperscript{185}

Their fears are supported by crime statistics indicating increases between 1999 and 2003 in all forms of sexual assault, general assault and a 36\% increase in breached Apprehended Violence Orders.\textsuperscript{186} Sexual violence or pressure on working class women often starts at an early age. In her experience as a ‘known person’ assisting young pregnant teenagers in need of safe abortions and support, Deidre explained:

… there’d be a fifty-five percent rape case, or physical abuse in many cases when it’s happened. You know, they just haven’t got the strength to say no, or won’t say no due to the pressures, peer group pressures, ‘they won’t like me anymore.’ It’s easier to say yes and have an abortion.

The collective grieving and trauma working class women experience from their suffering and that of their family and communities often finds expression in self-destruction. As the working class turns in on itself in response to alienation and dispossession, the state has responded with increasing efforts to imprison them.\textsuperscript{187}

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\textsuperscript{185} MHS, 2000, 27.
\textsuperscript{186} BOCSAR, 2003.
\textsuperscript{187} Fitzgerald, J. 1999. "Women In Prison: The Criminal Court Perspective." Crime and Justice Statistics, Bureau Brief, December, 1-5. Fitzgerald (1999, 1) states: ‘The number of women in NSW correctional centres has increased significantly in recent years. Several changes in criminal court processes may have contributed to this rise: overall more women are being convicted in the courts, women are more often appearing for offences likely to incur a prison penalty, and courts are more readily handing down sentences of imprisonment.’ The biggest increases in imprisonment from higher NSW courts are for property, drugs and driving offences.
\end{flushright}
Though local gendered crime statistics are unavailable, the criminalisation of working class women, especially indigenous women, in Campbelltown is visible and at times deadly.\textsuperscript{188} In 1992, for example, a local Aboriginal mother of three was sentenced to a month’s incarceration on a minor cannabis charge.\textsuperscript{189} The local magistrate refused to allow submission of a pre-sentence report into the woman’s medical background, which would have indicated her need for referral to drug-related health services. The day after the verdict the woman took her own life while in custody at Macquarie Fields Police Station. The Coroner found the magistrate had ignored the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommendation that imprisonment should be applied as a last resort for serious offences. None of the local council’s crime prevention strategies addresses the material factors underpinning ‘criminal behaviour’ or offers any particular protection to working class neighbourhoods.\textsuperscript{190} Moreover, the crime of poverty (and racism and sexism) committed daily against working class women and its consequences are always denied.

Local federal member, former Leader of the Opposition and Glen Alpine resident, Mark Latham, acknowledged the existence of classes in Campbelltown but argued the structural conflict between them was waning:

These days, you know, a young person growing up in my electorate, and they can live in a public housing area or a working-class area, but not too far away down the road, there will be one of these substantial master plan double-storey


\textsuperscript{190} CCC, 2004, 9.
housing estates and I think that makes the aspiration more tangible. It breaks down the feeling of us versus them, the chance to climb the ladder is just down the road, and if they can do it, I think it drives a higher level of economic aspiration among the next generation.\footnote{191}

In an era of growing class polarities it is difficult to see how all but a token few will be able to travel ‘down the road’ to affluence under the rule of capital.\footnote{192} The notion that everyone should aspire to these geographical and material heights ignores the social and ecological implications of the increased rate of resource consumption it implies.

Moreover, the working class women in this study and others rejected the moral economy of capital accumulation and consumerism.\footnote{193} On the same radio program that interviewed Latham, a Minto mother of 22 years residence rang to express her anger at the whole notion of aspirations and exclusive suburbs:

A lot of people get that negative attitude too, that because you come from the Department of Housing, you’re not as good as them. Well I defy that, I’m as good as the next person … I would like to own my own home, but I certainly wouldn’t want it behind a gated fence. If that’s all I have to aspire to, then I’d rather just stay where I am. … I would feel as if I was shutting myself off, and I would be doing what other people have done to me, you know, putting myself above other people, and I’m not above anybody else … When it all boils down to it, it’s your values that count more than anything else, your morals, your ethics, that sort of thing.\footnote{194}

\footnote{191} Cited in Morton, 2002.
\footnote{192} Saunders, P. 2001. "Household Income and Its Distribution." In Australian Bureau of Statistics \textit{Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Yearbook}. ABS, Canberra. Saunders article explains some of the complexities involved in calculating social inequality. The politics of interpreting the significance of social inequality data is a separate issue. In 2002, the Centre for Independent Studies, questioned the importance and political motivations behind these statistics (Sheehan, P. 2002. "Culture of Pessimism Masks Scale of Wealth Inequality." \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 16th January, 18). CIS researchers have argued that a recent Smith Family Report on rising poverty in Australia is misrepresentative. They claim that all Australians are better off in terms of absolute poverty (that is, by global standards) and that relative poverty has remained fairly stable when indirect income through social services like Medicare are taken into account.
\footnote{193} Sonya, for example, felt Australia had become ‘… a consumer driven, materialistic society, but maybe for a lot of people that’s exactly what makes us the lucky country.’
\footnote{194} Kathleen Calvert cited in Morton, 2002.
The current projects participants echoed the class antagonism and spirit of equality conveyed in these words. When asked her perception of Glen Alpine residents, Deidre spoke bitterly of those who aspired to be a class above the working population, vowing she would never want to live amongst them.

... They think they are the upper crust of Campbelltown. Yep, they are the North Shore of Campbelltown and don’t ever try to tell any of them that they’re not, because they are, as far as they are concerned.

Similarly Sandra explained:

They’re like when you read the novel of some little mining town ... They’re the actual mine owners... We’re the workers... ...there’s always going to be doctors... and lawyers... higher-ups, higher educated people. ... They’re not going to want to live... with us... the normal people... So they’re up there...

An Airds resident in another local study also noted:

...the minister for housing was on TV and he said he wasn’t going to build any more ‘ghettos’ like this, but he doesn’t want me living next door to him.195

These responses indicate the women’s strong appreciation of class divisions in the community. They see the rhetoric of aspirations and the spatial segregations in their city as manifestations of class domination. It is an ideology that offends their class values of equality, solidarity and making a living without exploiting others.

The social reproduction of working class culture is an integral element of working class women’s community labour. Their cultural mores derive from the combination of class biographies, everyday experiences of social inequality, and the exhortations of the mass media, education system and other social institutions. For example, Deidre’s remarks

indicate how the daily grind of paying off the mortgage undermines the influence of capitalist urgings about private home ownership:

[The ninety day wonders were for] poor people … no deposit, getting into your first home. … The amount of people who have gone into that! …It’s the *Australian dream* to own your own home (sarcastic). Tell you what - it’s bloody hard work … [The people here] have worked or are working for a living. All know what the pressures of life are. …. Even people that I know [who] are now okay, like my girlfriend …they’re probably one of a minority in the Campbelltown area that own their own house, but it was because of an inheritance, otherwise they would be in the same boat as we are - still paying off the damn thing. You’ve only got to look out our front balcony and look over the mortgages.

These class cultural experiences inform and are produced from every aspect of working class women lives. Sandra recalled for instance:

… at [a pizza delivery job] the wear and tear on the car meant you were virtually working for nothing… some of the tips were good. You used to go to the areas where you got the most tips and you *don’t* go to Glen Alpine! …everyone hated Glen Alpine ‘cause it was so far …and they stand there and want their five cents change… I never had a problem with Airds.

Importantly, these observations convey the women’s perceptions of their hardships as collective experiences, of people ‘in the same boat’ and of ‘everyone’ hating the indignity of serving arrogant and miserly middle class residents. What is at stake in the ideological class battle, just as much as the material and emotional struggle, is the survival of working people. The labour of reproducing a worldview that defends and promotes the interests of working people is increasingly difficult in a society structurally oriented towards the accumulation of capital and in the thrall of commodity fetishism.

The state’s refusal to reverse the polarisation of wealth in part through a more equitable distribution of community services must be understood as a structural consequence of its
relationship to capital. Socialising the care of children or people with disabilities, for example, would trigger a greater supply of superfluous labour into the formal economy. As the previous section indicates, private capital is incapable of sustaining the existing labour supply. In other words, a more progressive distribution of community resources, would increase labour force participation rates, push up unemployment and exacerbate social and political instability. Systemically unable to address social inequality without restricting capital growth, the state does little more than deflect the consequences and responsibility onto its casualties.

Boom or bust, Campbelltown’s working class women have faced an unrelenting fight against capital and the state for control over their communities and neighbourhoods and a dignified standard of living. In the process, they have witnessed their city carved into class enclaves with less and less affordable space, services and facilities available to them. The implications, as Sonya warned,

... if we travel down the road to absolute privatisation, we travel down the road absolutely to there being a dramatic divide in society between the people who can get by and the people who can’t.

At the same time, working class women’s sustainable values of equality, sufficiency and solidarity are drowned out by the cacophony of endless consumerism. It is within this aggressively competitive, hostile and alienating community setting that Campbelltown’s working class women struggle and resist the march of capital.

The structure of the formal political economy and the usurpation of their community infrastructure and space compel working class women to draw heavily on domestic
resources for survival. It leaves working class women with few resources other than their creative intelligence, resilience and solidarity networks. The personalisation of social issues under capitalism inflicts a heavy emotional and material toll on working class households and families.

**Domestic Structures**

Frankfurt School scholars, such as Horkheimer, viewed the nuclear family as a contradictory institution within capitalist society, serving as a conservative agent of socialisation, yet driven by an emotional logic that runs counter to the profit motive. In radical and socialist feminist theory the family under capitalism is understood as a site of women’s oppression. For example, Zaretsky argued

[w]hile the rise of industry largely freed women from traditional patriarchal constraints, the expansion of personal life created a new basis for their oppression – the responsibility for maintaining a private refuge from an impersonal society.

This section considers the salience of these arguments in explaining the political economy of working class women’s household labours in Campbelltown. It examines the characteristics of their domestic labour (material and emotional) in the context of declining numbers of conventional nuclear families and the prevalence of female-headed households. The consequences of these structural reconfigurations for working class women’s health and well-being are also considered.

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Evidence from this and other studies of working class women provides some support for the above arguments. In McCourt’s study in the 1970s, when wives were asked about their husband’s expectations of them, a typical response was:

I think they want a kind of refuge from the rest of the world. That’s it. When they walk in their home, the rest of the world can fall down.\footnote{199} These expectations could fall on all female relations from an early age. In the present study, Belinda recalled her experiences at around the same time. She explained when she was twelve and her mother left the family she effectively ‘brought herself up’ and was also

...the only female left in the house. I was left with all the chores, all the washing up ... doing a bit of shopping and having Dad’s shirts washed and that sort of thing ... I never actually felt like I had a childhood...

In both contexts, the family’s survival rested on a sole male breadwinner and much of the labour of other family members was directed at supporting or supplementing them. As indicated in the following chapter, however, these were not uncontested relationships.

The emotional impact of this division of labour included isolation and alienation of those who worked in the household, what some have referred to as ‘suburban neurosis.’\footnote{200} Various pills and potions were marketed to sufferers, whose ‘symptoms’ included depression and restlessness.\footnote{201} Instead, socialist feminists prescribed the socialisation of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{199} McCourt, K. 1977. Working-Class Women and Grass-Roots Politics. Indiana University Press, London, 76. \\
\textsuperscript{200} Powell, 1993. \\
social reproduction through communal laundries, child care centres and canteens, for example.  

These private household duties have been brought into the public domain through the process of commodification, rather than socialisation. Neither private capital nor the state can jeopardise the process of capital accumulation by absorbing the cost of daily and generational labour reproduction, freely performed in the household. Only where such services can be brought into the marketplace, thereby expanding capital, has there been any institutional support. The private childcare industry in Australia, for example, is rapidly expanding and consolidating at present. Consequently, the bulk of social reproduction labour for working class households continues to be performed in the private domain.

In the context of low and insecure incomes and inadequate, unaffordable public services, skills in the material and emotional management of the domestic domain are essential. Belinda noted, for example, that her family of five with one male breadwinner had:

...always struggled. Well, we still are … Most of the time I think I’m lucky if I’ve got $10 to rub together at the end of the week, I’m just waiting for pay day to come around again.

Hennessey, E. 1993. *A Cup of Tea, a Bex and a Good Lie Down*. Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, Townsville, Qld


The interviewees in this project conveyed their crucial expertise in making ends meet with meagre resources. Sandra’s partner earns most of the six-person household’s income and hands over his keycard for the weekly shopping.

… he might say ‘keep it a light shop’ so I’ll know to keep it within the $80 to $100 mark … I know how much he’s got in his bank … We always make sure we’ve got enough to cover everything… we don’t have any extras or anything but then again our bills are always paid on time…

Women’s responsibility for household financial management and consumption does not simply reflect a rational distribution of family work time.

Each of the women interviewed had undergone their own battle for control of the household budget. Sandra’s negative experiences of a past marriage, where her ex-husband drained her accounts, have made her more wary of the material, as well as the emotional, ties between partners:

…I’ve got [family allowance] going into my account and if anything does happen at least I’ve got that. … After what happened with [my ex-husband]… that scared me and I don’t want to ever have to be totally reliant on someone else’s money. … You don’t know what’s around the corner… or if anything happened to [my current partner]…

Gina on the other hand has been unsuccessful in her efforts to gain independent access to her husband’s wages, instead having to ask him for money for everything from the shopping to personal items and the children’s school expenses. Belinda also began her marriage with this arrangement, but eventually convinced her husband to permit her some financial responsibility; now she is expected to take care of all daily financial and consumption work. Other women simply do not trust their partners to make efficient use of inadequate household resources and to avoid debt traps. For instance, Megan explains:
… currently I earn more money than [my partner] … though I don’t earn very much money … it seems that money kind of directs all things in a lot of ways … I’d take a higher percentage of financial costs than what he would … I am a saver, he’s a spender … I’m more grounded … I just keep him in check in some ways … almost like a safety net for him because we could end up in some bad situations.

Sally’s ex-husband too was ‘a spender’ whose impulsiveness she had to guard against.

While the logic of emotionality is an important aspect of women’s unpaid domestic work, securing financial control of at least part of the household income is also an important objective for ensuring the material security of themselves and their children.

As argued by Zaretsky, the alienation and inequality characteristic of capitalist society inevitably permeates family life. It is no easy task for working-class women to hold their families or themselves together, emotionally and materially. Amott contends:

… [t]he most serious stress faced by married women . . . was associated with the reduced standard of living their families faced as a result of the cutbacks: ‘Their continued need to reduce what their wages can buy for their families means that the conflicts they feel between work and family life intensify. Earning less makes it feel harder and harder for them to continue to work and take care of their families.’ . . . they experienced it most acutely in the home rather than on the job. ... When their earnings fell, it was their work at home – the work of marketing, cooking, cleaning, caring – that became more difficult. An increasing number were the sole support of their households. Others found that their household’s standard of living could only be maintained if they took on one – or more - paid jobs in addition to their homemaking.

Some women in the present study went to extreme measures to hold their family together physically and materially. For example, when Gina’s husband decided to migrate to Australia, she faced the choice of supporting her four children alone in South America or risking a life in a foreign country with a difficult marriage. She pinned her

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hopes on the marriage lasting and the availability of some government help with the children if things went badly. The greater availability of paid work and sole parent entitlements, as meagre as they are, does provide options that former generations of working class women did not have.

Having a family need not require women to endure unsatisfactory marriages and economic dependency to the extent it once did, though divorce or separation still leaves many women below the poverty line. In Campbelltown women are the head of 24% of families with dependents compared to 15% across the state.\textsuperscript{205} These figures underestimate the proportion of female-headed households. They do not include lone female households or two parent families where women are the main income earners. The proportion of female-headed families is more than double this in lower income neighbourhoods.\textsuperscript{206} Nine of the twelve research participants are, or have been, the sole or primary income earner of a household and some were raised in female-headed households.

Nuclear family formations and the privatisation of personal life hinged on the financial viability of a full-time male breadwinner and the absence of an alternative income source for women.\textsuperscript{207} Tiano notes:

\begin{quote}
\ldots for traditional norms surrounding women’s roles to be widely practiced, most women must be able to form stable partnerships with men who have the economic wherewithal to support them and their children. Men must have access to
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{206} ABS, 2001b, B14 and B17; ABS, 2001g, B04, B14 and B17; ABS, 2001c, B04.

\textsuperscript{207} Zaretsky, 1976; Bryson, 1988, 135-136; Susser, 1988.
jobs that pay a sufficient family wage, making it unnecessary for partnered women to earn an income. When, on the contrary, many women live in households headed by females and economic conditions are such that the income of a single male wage earner is insufficient to support the household, the women are propelled by economic need into the labor force.\textsuperscript{208}

Only 53\% of Campbelltown men (15 years and older) work full-time.\textsuperscript{209} Male parents are found in 71\% (68\% partnered and 4\% alone) of local families with dependents.\textsuperscript{210} In comparison, female parents are found in 94\% of such families (70\% partnered and 24\% alone). Chant documents the rise of female-headed household internationally as a consequence of the decline in working class men’s ability and/or willingness to support a family and women’s unwillingness to remain in unsatisfactory relationships where alternative options are available.\textsuperscript{211}

There is local evidence that family breakdown is disproportionately affecting working class households. While the proportion of divorced and separated women living in Campbelltown increased by less than 2\% between 1996 and 2001 (still 3\% above the state average), this conceals the disproportionate number living in lower income suburbs.\textsuperscript{212} Respectively, in Claymore and Airds, 21\% and 23\% of women (15 years and over) are separated or divorced compared to 4\% in Glen Alpine.\textsuperscript{213} The difficulties of


\textsuperscript{209} ABS, 1996a, X20; ABS, 2001a, B25.

\textsuperscript{210} ABS, 2001a, B14 and B17.

\textsuperscript{211} Chant, 1997.

\textsuperscript{212} ABS, 1996b, B04; ABS, 2001a, B04; ABS, 2001f, B04.

\textsuperscript{213} ABS, 2001b, B04; ABS, 2001e, B04; ABS, 2001g, B04.
maintaining nuclear working class families in an increasingly unequal society not only undermine existing families, but discourage young people from establishing them.\textsuperscript{214}

The discrepancy between working class incomes and the cost of living for young people in Campbelltown is causing young working age men to live with their parents longer and delay marriage. ABS findings on delayed family formation at the national level reinforce these trends. Young people are facing greater difficulty in becoming economically independent from their parents for reasons including:

- A higher proportion of young adults under the age of 25 years in post-school education, a higher proportion of people in this age group living in the parental home and the increased rates of part-time employment and underemployment for persons in this age group.\textsuperscript{215}

These factors are contributing to men postponing marriage. 43\% of 25-34 year old men were married compared to 70\% of 35-44 year olds in 2001.\textsuperscript{216} Correspondingly, the proportion of partnered women aged 25-34 years old dropped by 7\% between 1996 and 2001.\textsuperscript{217} These trends generated a 5\% decline in the number of people living in couple families with children since 1996.\textsuperscript{218} Conversely, the number of couples without children and the number of people living in lone parent families rose by 10\% and 7\% respectively.

\textsuperscript{216} ABS, 2001a, B04, B14.
\textsuperscript{217} ABS, 1996b, B14; ABS, 2001a, B14.
\textsuperscript{218} ABS, 1996b, B22 and B24; ABS, 2001a, B17.
The combination of rising living costs and the structure of state social security entitlements are also contributing to the recomposition of working class households in Campbelltown. Wilson argues ‘social welfare policies amount to no less than the state organisation of domestic life.’  

‘Working poor’ couples in a traditional nuclear family are entitled to few direct government benefits. Couple families in which one partner receives unemployment, sickness or Austudy payments are worse off. Birrell contends gaining a partner financially disadvantages single mothers.

On the other hand, non-conjugal relations are able to pool wages and state benefits without penalty. The increase in independent children, dependent students (15-24 years), and unrelated individuals living in the family home appears to offer some support for these trends, as does the 11% decline in young people living alone. It may be better economically for some working class couples to live apart.

These trends have significant implications for the gendered division of labour in local working class households. The increasing difficulty of forming working class households and the ongoing requirement for two adult wages are often not factored into domestic labour research. In Campbelltown fewer women have male partners to assist with or exacerbate household work. Fewer households conform to the breadwinner/non-employed housewife model, indicating the amount of time either partner has for housework is minimal. Though no local data was available on time-use patterns, the

\[\text{219} \text{ Cited in Bryson, 1988, 135.} \]
\[\text{220} \text{ Family allowance is the main exception.} \]
\[\text{221} \text{ Cited in McManus, G. 2004. "Victims of the Boom." Herald Sun, 29th March, 10.} \]
\[\text{222} \text{ ABS, 1996a, X30; ABS, 2001a, B14.} \]
following chapter considers working class women’s responses and expectations around the distribution of domestic labour.

For working class women one of the more difficult aspects of family breakdown is the disruption to personal networks that are often the only buffer between family survival and ruin. All but two of the interviewees live close to at least one extended family member. These networks are conduits of emotional and practical support, more than financial assistance. For instance, Belinda anguishes over the financial predicament of her daughter who is a sole parent. Though she is in no position to help her pay the rent, she does provide housing of last resort, providing her daughter and grandchild with the emotional and practical assurance that they will not end up on the street. Belinda too has been able to call on her mother-in-law, daughters and siblings for help with childcare, housework and shopping as needed. Her father helped pay the rent when her husband was ill or on strike. Though Belinda lives with her immediate family she is intimately connected to a broader domestic political economy that reciprocally involves each extended family member. Assistance from this survival system is available to alleviate material or emotional distress, to support defensive actions such as strikes and other political activities, and to facilitate community or waged labour.

Family is not just about fulfilling social roles and expectations or even attaining status; for working class women, particularly those from marginalised cultural backgrounds,

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family can be a fortress. Working class women are keenly affected by the deprivation of such support. Deidre, for example, was an only daughter and lost her mother to cancer at an early age:

… it hit me, when my mum was about to die. I was about to give birth. I didn’t have any support. I didn’t have a sister or any comeback whatsoever. … I gave birth … and basically nobody even knew. I gave birth to him at home. … God I would have loved somebody to have come and cuddled me and say ‘you know what you’re doing there is great’ you know or ‘why don’t you try this’ or you know ‘you don’t have to do it this way, try this way.’ I didn’t have a mum to do that and a lot of young women around this area don’t have that…

The commodification, rather than socialisation, of care and support leaves working class women who do not have family networks particularly vulnerable to domestic crises or conflict.

Leaving tumultuous households is complicated by the material circumstances single women can expect to face, as much as the emotional damage they endure. For example, Denise suffered years of domestic conflict before feeling materially capable and emotionally confident of supporting her children alone. As her personal networks were mainly based on the couple’s friendships they were also unwilling to intervene. Moreover, because Denise came from a family whose relations were deeply scarred by poverty, she did not have a supportive survival system to help her out as her marriage disintegrated. Under these sorts of circumstances, it is not difficult to see why working class women remain or return to difficult marriages. Belinda recalled her efforts to help a friend in danger:

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... some go back to abusive men ... I had a friend like that and we actually got her out of the house, into another house, and took her to the Salvo’s and got her furniture and everything else ... he was the type to hold a gun to her head and belt her around ... he was an animal.

Lake and Holmes suggested: ‘If these thugs walked down the streets en masse and did what they do at home in secret, the army would be brought out.’ Despite the copious evidence of violence against women, negligible attention is directed at efforts to address the social causes.

Too often working class women’s health and well-being is ignored, trivialised, criminalised or medicalised. The character of the medical system under capitalism tends to reproduce health inequalities. The history of women being sterilised, sedated, psychologised and moralised by the medical elite is well documented.

The women in this study have not escaped such treatment. For example, Belinda explains what happened to her after experiencing dizziness, fainting and nausea in her early twenties:

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...well I went to the doctor’s because I thought there was something physically wrong with me and they kept on saying ‘no there’s nothing wrong with you. It’s all in your head.’ So they sent me up to a psychiatrist who just doped me with pills and told me I’d never be a hundred percent better … Nobody ever bothered to find out why...

Eighteen years later Belinda was diagnosed with Meniere’s disease, a chronic middle ear condition. In the intervening years psychologists convinced her she had agoraphobia and that her physical ailments were psychosomatic. Belinda now deals with the physical and psychological legacy of her psychiatric and pharmaceutical mistreatment. Moreover, this offence has limited her employment prospects and her ability to materially and emotionally support and nurture her children. She is deeply resentful of the dismissive arrogance of some medical experts: ‘you put your trust in professional people and they can screw your life up so badly.’

In addition to dealing with the prejudices of middle class and male experts who dominate the medical profession, working class women must battle the interests of the medical industry. For example, Gina incurred a serious repetitive strain injury at work. The company went to considerable lengths to avoid paying her workers compensation. In addition to the private investigator paid to follow her she was sent to ‘independent’ medical assessors:

I used to go to all these so-called doctors. I hate doctors so much! … I’d go to work and the letter they sent said ‘there’s nothing wrong with this lady, just put her on normal duties’ … That went on for years … [One] even apologised, ‘I’m sorry I had to do this … I can’t go on your side … I’m working for the insurance’ … it was just unbelievable.
Gina’s experiences reveal one of the ways in which the priorities of the medical-industrial complex and the state consort to imperil working class women’s health. In the medical profession’s long history of complicity with big business and the state, its relationship with the pharmaceuticals industry has been most subject to scrutiny in recent times.

General practitioners often offer pills to working class women for the physical or emotional symptoms of their social sufferings. In a British study, Gabe explains how working class women understood and used prescribed drugs (tranquilisers/benzodiazepines) as a ‘resource’ in the management of everyday life. In an Australian study women who did not earn an independent living were more likely to report ‘having had a nervous breakdown and regularly using analgesic or psychotropic drugs.’ A number of the women in this study and the previously mentioned Campbelltown disabilities study similarly relied on anti-depressants, blood pressure pills and various other medications to get them through the everyday trauma of their lives. Medication does not remove the structural causes and obstacles to working class women’s wellbeing. Despite the prescriptions the women above were still experiencing depression, anxiety, stress and fatigue.

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It is often only at the point of complete physical or mental breakdown that working class women are relieved of their responsibilities for a short while. For example, Deidre explained:

… I basically want a holiday. My husband has had a couple of heart attacks and that this year, … I’ve had gall stone problems … I had a major gall stone attack then, thought I was dying, but I went to work of course (laughs). I had an appointment to see a student who had a problem. Anyway, I’ve got to have a gall stone operation … and then I’m having three weeks off. Holidays. Yeehah!

For other women, serious illness is no cause for rest. In Gill et. al.’s study one local single mother was literally gasping for breath before seeking medical help and even then leaving her household post was not an option. One mother reported:

Well it does catch up with me. … on the Sunday night, I stopped breathing. In the morning I thought bugger I don’t have time to stop breathing, I’ve got to get the clothes on the line for Christ sake. [The hospital staff] said, … ‘You’re not going home.’ I said: ‘Well I’ve got to go home.’ I had to. I’ve got [my disabled son] at home and the two girls … so I rang them up and said: ‘Guess what? I can’t come home.’ … They said: ‘Well, you’ve got to come home. Who else is there? There’s no one else.’ Not [coping] well at all. But then again I had breast cancer removed before Christmas and I had treatment for that … [it’s] all stress related.

In other circumstances labouring in the formal economy offers relief from the constant care of the household: ‘I go to work because I need that break away.’234 These experiences speak of the toll wreaked on working class women by a social system that offers no remedy or pill for poverty and alienation.

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234 Gill, et. al., 2004.
The emphasis on medical symptoms like depression and anxiety distracts from the dispossessing of self and social connectedness. Belinda, for example, drew a direct connection between her feelings of inferiority and economic position:

… I suppose the old thing, everybody thinks the less money you have the less of a person you are … I think everybody thinks if you’re poor, you’re not intelligent … you’re just not worthy, you’re not as important as people with money.

In another instance, Sandra was ‘mentally’ unable to cope with the theft of her savings by her partner, resulting in temporary loss of custody of her children:

I said I wanted to separate, the next day I had no money, no bank account or anything…. At that stage I don’t think I was able mentally to look after anyone except myself… I didn’t fight for the girls, as I didn’t want to upset them… I had to find somewhere to live.

Moreover, the social isolation that poverty forces on many working-class women can be emotionally debilitating. Belinda reflected on her brief period of paid work as ‘probably the happiest time of [her] life … because there was no financial problem.’ When she lost her job due to pregnancy she feels she became emotionally reliant on her husband. She explained she did not want ‘a professional career, but just to be independent.’ As mentioned above, similar circumstances drove Gina to consider suicide. As noted above by Zaretsky, these women’s alienation from society and the means of self-sufficiency plays havoc with their emotional well-being.

Working class women’s emotional labour is intensified by the vulnerability of those they care for. For example, the combination of material disadvantage and emotional isolation are particularly dangerous for working class men. They are most prone to depression and
destructive behaviour when unpartnered.\textsuperscript{235} When working class women seek to walk away from a problematic relationship they often know they may be placing their former partner in serious jeopardy. In Sidel’s study, for example, one woman explained she turned down job prospects that paid more than her husband to protect his self-esteem. Donaldson also contends working class women are socialised to ‘feel guilty if they cause trouble’ or distress, particularly to those within their kinship and community networks.\textsuperscript{236}

Individualism is an indulgence and contradiction amongst working class women. Langston suggests ‘making an occupation out of taking care of yourself through therapy, aerobics, jogging, dressing for success, gourmet meals and proper nutrition, etc., may be responses that are directly rooted in privilege.’\textsuperscript{237} Knowing how difficult working class life is, women often find it difficult to turn away from those in need even if it compromises their own well-being.

Working class women do not have the luxury of simply throwing money at personal problems. They cannot provide the depressed unemployed husband with a job. They cannot pay for the dental work that keeps their partner in constant pain. They cannot pay for childcare or respite when everything gets too much. Because working class people often cannot buy their way out of problems, working class women shoulder their collective pain.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{236} Donaldson, 1991, 79.
\end{thebibliography}
The long-term implications of continually pushing mind, body and spirit to the limits of endurance are higher morbidity and shorter life expectancy, as these women well know. 238 One woman caring for her son with a disability commented:

…I think it ages you. I think it makes you more tired. At the end of it, sometimes you’re so tired. … I think that the stress that causes on me will be my downfall, unless I do something about it. But what can you do about it? It’s not going to change because you’ll have him all your life.

Under capitalism, working class women pay for the private sustenance of the working class with their lifeblood, physical and emotional. 239

The impacts on working class communities of the premature deaths and poor health of working class women are often overlooked. Their well-being is particularly important because children comprise a higher proportion of the population in lower income suburbs. For instance, 39% of the population in Claymore is under 15 years old compared to 25% in Glen Alpine. 240 The early loss of a working class mother or sister is not just an emotional loss, it can destroy whole survival systems. The effects are most acutely illustrated by the experiences of indigenous families following wholesale state removal of generations of children. 241 Their experiences demonstrate the vulnerability of low-income families to systematic oppression, but also their significance in surviving the onslaughts of capitalism since colonial times. 242

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239 Zaretsky, 1976, 141.
240 ABS, 2001b, B01; ABS, 2001c, B01; ABS, 2001d, B01; ABS, 2001g, B01. The figures are 35% for Airds and 28% for Macquarie Fields.
As Zaretsky contended, the isolation of working class women in the household and the requirement that they shield members from the injuries of capitalist social relations is often debilitating.\textsuperscript{243} The extent to which they are engaged in the formal and community political economy has considerable bearing on how well they survive and the contribution they can make to the social reproduction of their class in the domestic arena. As in Peel’s study of Elizabeth, working class women in Campbelltown are the first and last line of defence against those who benefit from the subjugation of their class.\textsuperscript{244}

The foregoing examination argues the inefficiencies and inequities of the capitalist mode of production in Campbelltown reverberate across the three arenas in which working class women labour. The logic of capital accumulation drives endless commodification of ecological resources and human relations, while at the same time driving down the costs of production, causing the immiseration of labour. Capital accumulation increasingly divides and marginalises the population into those whose labour is required and are therefore able to consume, and those who cannot. The inequality, deterioration in living standards, and individual and social ill-health that ensues destabilises the social order. As private capital appropriates more surplus value it simultaneously deprives the state of the revenue necessary to control growing social instability. The state’s inability to control labour forces the benefactors of capital to shield and fortify themselves against class retaliation.

\textsuperscript{243} Zaretsky, 1976.
\textsuperscript{244} Peel, M. 1993. \textit{Making a Place: Women in the 'Workers' City'.} Urban Research Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra.
Working class women’s social reproduction labour is centrally positioned within this political economy. Gaining adequate income and community resources becomes harder, which undermines the strength of working class support networks. At the same time, they find their coping strategies increasingly under surveillance and threat and subject to greater sanctions. As investigated in the following chapter, despite these constrictions working class women, not only survive, but also resist these encroachments on their standard of living and autonomy.
5 Campbelltown: Survival and Resistance

This chapter analyses working class women’s agency in relation to the structural constraints examined in the previous chapter. Working class women’s labour and resistance in the formal, community and domestic arenas of the broader political economy has significance beyond the daily and generational reproduction of their class. Their experiences of the rule of capital necessarily generate an alternative social vision and political culture that does not rest on the exploitation of labour.

In surviving capitalism, working class women’s everyday struggles and resistances bring their vision and values to life. However, their pursuit of hopes, dreams and a sufficient standard of living takes place in a world not of their making. They face a divisive social system that brooks no alternatives. Social control and fragmentation is imperative to the perpetuation of capital. Some of the pervasive mechanisms have been previously discussed. Yet, working class women evade and undermine the power of capital at every turn; this chapter offers an emblematic exploration of how they survive and subvert the forces seeking to enchain them. It considers how their unseen daily battle against inequality and injustice on a personal and social level threatens the dominant order.
Responses to Formal Structures

Although the power of the capitalist state to destroy working class lives and communities cannot be underestimated, its power is not monolithic or beyond contestation and change. Working class women challenge and attempt to transform it constantly. These passages examine their relationship with formal political and economic structures. They argue working class women’s experiences of parliamentarism and the paid workforce lay the foundations for their disenchantment and rejection of them as paths to individual and social liberation. Their encounters with political parties, politicians and bosses provide them with daily evidence of the disregard that capital’s purveyors have for their labour. Moreover, their experiences force and inspire creative strategies aimed at the re-humanisation and reclamation of a broader political economy. Their interventions demonstrate the possibilities and hopes for a genuinely democratic social order rooted in social equality.¹

As previously indicated, working class women are unwelcome in the halls of formal political power; yet, they are the unpaid and unnamed foot soldiers essential to the viability of the party system. Many of the women in this project, and other local studies, have had direct involvement or contact with the major parties.² Five had participated in election campaigns and others had lobbied politicians individually over specific issues. All were embittered by their experiences.

At significant material and emotional expense, these working class women have tested the two-party system and found it wanting. For example, Robyn was imbued with a vision of social justice and equality, from her coal-mining grandfather and the hardships of her immediate family. She was a young woman eager to pursue these ideals by working for a trade union or the ALP. She actively participated in a local ALP branch and applied for whatever work they had going, to no avail. As the daughter of rank and file workers on Sydney’s outer western fringe, she did not have the contacts or qualifications often necessary to obtain paid union or party positions. The Party deigned to offer her ‘experience’ as an unpaid campaign manager for a candidate in an unwinnable seat. Though Robyn was unemployed, without transport and living out of a suitcase at the time, she agreed to the assignment following assurances of a future paid position. Robyn laboured eighteen-hour days, seven days a week for six months. She drew on every relation, friend and acquaintance she had in the local area for fundraising, leafleting, enveloping, and publicity exercises. Against the odds, the ALP managed a considerable swing in its favour in that electorate, but was denied victory. For her efforts, Robyn was rewarded with a three month part-time job for the party doing ‘unofficial’ work, without future work references. The internal disputes and manipulative exploits of the party left Robyn and those close to her, thoroughly drained and disheartened.

After Robyn met Heather and Jackie through this project, they agreed to help her with the local campaign. Heather and Jackie were experienced welfare workers and grassroots activists, and had peripheral involvement with the ALP through these activities.
Though these engagements had left them wary of cronyism, complacency and abuse of power particularly associated with formal political organisations, they were willing to devote their precious time and energy to aid a sister in struggle. Heather and Jackie were prepared to work in solidarity with a local working class woman genuinely motivated by the suffering of working people and not the ALP as an electoral machine.

Other women in the study felt coerced into party work. For instance, Gina’s husband was associated with the Liberal Party. Having extensive contacts within a particular ethnic constituency, her husband volunteered Gina to host barbecues and other events in her home for the mayor. Gina recalled he

…asked them to invite people [of a particular ethnicity] from Campbelltown … to get the votes … [The politicians] hang around, they’re drinking … then you see them in the street and they don’t know you … [The mayor] used to get angry because we had too many Australian people [at the functions] … he wanted to brainwash the [people of ethnic background] who new nothing about it…

Each of the above women had given of the meagre resources they had in the hope these parties would further the interests of labour. Yet they battled to gain any respect on a personal level, let alone any collective benefit.

Disappointment and a sense of betrayal by the major parties resonated through these women’s testimonies. None felt that they had any real stake in them. Sonya articulated her frustration with the ALP, which she had been brought up to believe was the party of working people. She explains the ALP

… absolutely always had the big picture, fair society idea in mind and then somewhere in the later stages of the Hawke
era and into the Keating era adopted enthusiastically the concept of economic rationalism. … the Labor Party has moved dramatically to the right and has lost the plot in terms of the small socialist vision that it was once considered unquestioningly to be about.

Sally also voted Labor with the, often dashed, expectations they would look ‘after the working class, middle class, whereas Liberals traditionally look after the wealthy upper classes.’ Aarons contends the working class withdrawal of its traditional support for the Australian Labor Party, is understandable ‘because it presided over mass sackings and long-term unemployment, lower real wages, soaring incomes for and blatant tax evasion by the rich.’

In their own way, each of the women argued against right-wing market-driven politics. The fetishisation of the marketplace and the abandonment of a progressive humanist agenda were commonly perceived as aggressions against ordinary people. Even Gina who had once actively supported the Liberal Party and was ardently opposed to the ALP, awaited an organisation that would champion the interests of workers, the marginalised and end social inequality. The respondents saw the ALP as courting middle class and aspirant voters and the Liberal party as the mouthpiece of the wealthy and powerful and, in Sonya’s words, ‘a puppet for big business.’ The axis between private capital and the state, against workers, was enunciated by many of the women. Sally, for example, explained the power of industry meant politicians were ‘not necessarily the leaders of the country.’ As discussed below, politicians generally were seen as dangerous and influential courtiers of capital and the affluent classes.

In siding with industry and the prosperous classes, the agendas of the major parties were seen by the respondents to be in conflict with the interests of labour. In this regard, Belinda argued the major parties are

... all much the same. Whereas, years ago, Labor was for the workers and Liberals were for the rich. I think the Liberals are still for the rich, but I think Labor is more to the right than what they were ... Labor are still a little bit more to the workers, to the battlers, but not as much as they used to be.

The conservative side of politics generally appealed little to the interviewees. In addition to Gina’s dissatisfaction with the Liberal Party, Sandra scoffed at stereotypical perceptions of working class conservatism:

Pauline Hanson... our best friend [laughs] ... I can’t stand Pauline Hanson and I don’t like a lot of things that she stands for either but ... you’re always going to get people that listen to what she says 'cause they want it back how they had it in the fifties... Everything nice and white...

Denise also rejected Hansonism but felt it had given her an opportunity to challenge the views of her parents and might help forge a more progressive understanding of ‘race’ issues:

... it’s actually brought it to the surface. ... talking about racism ... And even if my parents ... can admit it now ... maybe you’re not going to change people over night, but maybe just a little ... has changed in how they treat other people. ... at least people are talking about it, it’s not swept under the carpet.

Overall, most of the women voted Labor with misgivings, two voted Greens first and Labor second, one voted Independent and one regularly voted informal. All were unimpressed with the choice of parties and candidates on offer and many took exception to the whole electoral process as an elaborate and expensive waste of time.
The absence of a major party that will fight for their communities contributed to their resentment of compulsory voting and volatility in electoral behaviour. Gina and Sandra, for example, expressed their distaste at being coerced into the debasement of genuine democracy. Sandra rejected the notion that Australia was a democratic society and explained why she begrudged the criminalisation of abstaining:

I can’t stand politics. I really can’t. … [but] I do question it. … … I usually go for independents… I never vote for Liberal or Labor ever ever, cause I can’t stand either of them and I know that they’re always going to be the ones that get in, … I vote for whoever’s name looks the best…. In my family we always voted Liberal – ‘you can’t trust Labor’. Then the older I got and I’d read about other stuff and I’d hear people talk… I’d think well you can’t trust Liberal either cause look what they’ve done … they’re both as untrustworthy as each other.

Sandra’s experiences resemble Gina’s disillusionment with the Liberal Party following their exploitation of her labour and community networks. Gina deliberately votes informal. These circumventions and avoidances are small signs of the wider disenchantment with capitalist democracy being expressed throughout the western world.4

Trends towards party ‘dealignment’ have emerged in many parliamentary democracies, especially in relation to the female vote. While Australian voters appear relatively stable in their party preferences, some indications of change are emerging, particularly among women.5 Former Federal Director of the Liberal Party, Andrew Robb, observed: ‘… women have become increasingly unaligned to the major political parties compared with

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men. And that is where their power is…" It is vulnerable, hard-pressed women with caring responsibilities that are least enamoured with the major parties. For example, a study of voting behaviour during the 1993 GST-dominated electoral campaign, found the Coalition lost 6.6% of the vote, but 11.6% of 25-34 year old women’s support. Many were women with dependent children and stressful workloads who ‘could not take the chance of any more disruption in their life’ and who objected to the inflated prices and decreased services that the GST would deliver. While some have interpreted party dealignment as a sign of decline in class factors, this and other evidence suggests the opposite. The jettisoning of party loyalties echoes the disenchantment of labour with both parties of capital, especially as the ALP increasingly reveals its allegiance to the marketeers and moneyed classes.

In the respondent’s views, the electoral process was a sham that forced them to choose between two unnecessary evils. Electoral success offered no conferment of authority or mandate in their opinion. Sally, a primary school teacher, explained she avoids the televised parliamentary sessions when educating working class children on the virtues of parliamentary democracy:

I guess I’m not a political person … [but] when you watch a sitting of parliament it’s a joke. We run a parliament at our school and we don’t encourage our children to watch too many of those things, because we try to have an ordered

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7 Robb, 1996, 132.  
8 Robb, 1996, 132.  
9 Robb, 1996, 132.  
discussion, whereas [politicians] tend to get up and yell and scream a lot. Sometimes you wonder how much they’re really representing their constituents.

In the context of the social suffering and hardship engulfing their communities, the pretence and corruption of parliamentarism left Sandra cold:

… what do you expect… a bunch of men running around with all this power… that annoys me. … You don’t need a bunch of school kids bitching in the playground… this is a country…

Like others in the study, the waste of public monies being leached through overblown salaries and perks, while the country struggled with social and environmental problems infuriated Deidre. The public posturing of politicians caused equal affront. Angry at the lack of resources being directed to the city, Deidre challenged a visiting minister to:

… live a week in Raby, a week in Campbelltown, a week in Claymore, a week in Minto, and let’s see which one she comes out of. Yes. You know its all well and fine for these people. Like, she’s done her visit the other week. She doesn’t have to live there and she can go home to her place anytime she wants.

The social distance and artificiality of most parliamentarians made a mockery of the grievances and hopes of working people. The respondent’s political commentary and skepticism registered their experiences and frustrations with what they see as the illegitimate authority of parliamentarism.

The women’s views are grounded in their everyday experiences of exclusion, exploitation and disappointments of a political system that has continually failed them, that is more concerned with controlling than liberating their communities as argued
The burdens of labour (paid and unpaid) restricted the extent of working class women’s involvement in overt political activism. Sonya contended:

I do think that the more time one has to spend on simply being able to get through each day the less one has to think about any bigger picture. … for a lot of women in the working class their day is filled up with keeping the home and raising the children and maybe working part or full time in order to survive financially … it leaves little room for an understanding or a desire to be involved …

For Robyn, the emotional and physical drain of work and the associated travel kept her from community activism: ‘I thought that I could get involved in community organisations … but it just seemed to peter out of me … once I started full-time work I was drained …[by] the travel two hours a day each way.’ Sandra also lamented the limited scope of her own community involvement and was appreciative of those who she saw as acting on her behalf:

… I’m quite grateful to those people for giving up their time to be involved … but I’m just not prepared to do it myself… usually time-wise and I’ve got the kids… I don’t join in… I was going to help adults to read … but I would have had to do a two-day course and I didn’t want to leave [the baby]… It was a nice idea…

Campbell argues politics and organisation costs money, time and resources, of which many working class women are in short supply. The concentration of formal political organisations in the inner city further restricts their interest and ability to contribute.

Too often, working class women’s disenchantment with parliamentary democracy and the two-party system is dismissed as ignorance or apathy. Despite appearances, these

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working class women were far from disinterested in politics. Some professed their indifference too much; hating formal politics reflects intense concern. Others have taken an active, if fruitless, part in the process. They anguish over a political system that falls so far short of their visions of how things ought and need to be. Apathy is, however, a strategic response to a deleterious political structure.\(^\text{14}\) It registers disapproval and rejection. Apathy represents a partial internalisation of the devaluation of their views, but also a strategy for coping with the sting of disempowerment and marginalisation in their own society. Admitting to others or oneself, that they care about the abuses of power surrounding them when they feel powerless to stop it, absorbs emotional resources working class women cannot spare. Moreover, apathy is often a feigned response by the less powerful to ward off censure, surveillance and harm; turning their backs on such a system registers their rejection and resistance while avoiding these risks.

The women interviewed rejected conservative politics for a more progressive vision of society. Gina, the respondent with perhaps the most ostensibly conservative viewpoint, argued she does not have the option of voting for a party that stands for a world in which ‘everybody’s equal … a party that would work more for the poor.’ For others, like Sandra, achieving social equality was an impossible dream:

\[\ldots\text{You can’t have an equal society at all, regardless of where in the world you live… There’s rich, there’s poor, there’s ethnic groups that are… disadvantaged… The airport}^{\text{15}}\text{ for one thing…}\]

\(^\text{15}\) Sandra refers to the long-running proposal to build Sydney’s second major airport terminal at Badgery’s Creek, thirty minutes from Campbelltown. The proposal is currently off the political agenda.
nobody’s ever considered putting it over on the north shore… It’s always automatically down here somewhere… It’s not equal anywhere in the world… and Australia’s no different… They tried it with communism … to equalise everyone but that still didn’t work ‘cause there’s always someone that’s up there running it and getting more than the next person… I don’t see how it could be possible… I think there are certain ways that we can try and equalise like with regard to racial stuff… education is another way to try to equalise… To each his own… there’s always going to be people driving trucks…I think [equality’s] just a dream myself… For Sandra and many working class people, the distance between the existing social order and their ideal society is unfathomable, but a dream they nonetheless cling to.

These women saw dignity for all people based on material and non-material equality as fundamental. The compromises and concessions foisted on working class people produce a myriad of contradictions between their daily life under capitalism and the kind of world they hoped for. Some respondents, for instance, raised the oppression of indigenous people and refugees, as political concerns. Though some showed little understanding of the long term and ongoing destructiveness of institutionalised racism, they supported compensation and material support for indigenous communities. Others supported the idea of work for the dole programs while criticising the lack of real jobs for young people. Some sympathised with the plight of starving millions overseas but denied Australia should have any part in or responsibility for the consequences. These paradoxical responses suggest experiences of fractured, rather than false, consciousness.16

These women have ventured to grasp the shape of a better world and a path leading to it.

If the obstacles to women’s participation in parties and unions are truisms, they overlook

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women’s willingness and determination to mobilise themselves if the prospects of making a social difference and gaining some autonomy are plausible.\textsuperscript{17} Although misled, isolated, impoverished and thwarted in their efforts, Robyn, Heather, Jackie, and Gina struggled for their ideals within the party system; a vigour partly attributable to their lack of dependents.

For the more isolated of the interviewed women, the devolution and decentralisation of decision-making was a precondition for their greater participation in formal political processes. Sonya explained:

\begin{quote}
I see local members for instance of state parliament and federal parliament to be increasingly irrelevant to local communities … my own personal belief is that local government should be more and more responsible and that … state and federal members don’t … actually have their finger on the pulse …
\end{quote}

Denise thought she had more chance to influence her environment at the local level. She argued her community-based actions might be

\begin{quote}
…kind of insignificant successes on the broader picture, but in my life, those little individual, insignificant successes have been magnificent for me. …at a local level you can get them to move a bus stop or close the laneway down next to your house … or they rezone the school and you can fight at that level … and to me that’s empowering and that is influencing.
\end{quote}

The desire for greater involvement and control over the formal political structures affecting their lives was echoed throughout the interviews. As Seabrook points out ‘Loss of control over environment is always an unfreedom.…’\textsuperscript{18} The women’s skepticism that centralised parliamentary democracy is the best approach for securing liberty and dignity


is evident. Contrary to stereotypes, these women conveyed a preparedness to reclaim their lives and communities through a localised participatory decision-making structure.

The interviews revealed these working class women have rejected, not just the party system, but centralised parliamentarism. They have tested this political structure in various ways and it has repeatedly failed to deliver on their needs and hopes. It was seen as a structure of ruling that serves the interests of the upper classes and their allies foremost.\textsuperscript{19} Parliamentary democracy was essentially an ideological and coercive apparatus to deny social and economic equality. Dowd contends:

\begin{quote}
Industrial capitalism cannot function adequately \textit{without} political democracy. …full democracy is incompatible with capitalism’s innate inequalities of income, wealth, and power, and of prestige and status.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Parliamentarism emerged in the eighteenth century as part of a broader ideological campaign by the ruling classes to contain the growing working class movements for full democracy (political, economic and social).\textsuperscript{21} Its advent gave the ruling class new weapons of political control over those they exploited.

Working class women are at the heart of this ongoing struggle. The state continues to ‘take the risk out of democracy’ on behalf of the ruling class.\textsuperscript{22} It faces perpetual challenges in obtaining working class women’s subservience, because they are daily

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{22}] Carey, 1995.
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confronted with material and emotional circumstances that conflict with capitalist ideology. For these women, social well-being and equality, a decent standard of living and high quality public infrastructure were uppermost. As Gina argued, ‘the more important things in your home should be the more important things in your country.’

The provision of these social goods is structurally irreconcilable with capital accumulation over the long-term. Given working class women’s political and economic goals include the reduction of unemployment and the general emancipation of labour from the control of capital, the parliamentary system cannot be allowed to facilitate their interests.

The straitjacketing of working class women’s involvement and influence in the formal political arena is a necessary aspect of parliamentarism under capitalism. Capital accumulation is a primary objective of the state. This entails the immiseration of labour and the suppression of any subsequent class conflict. Marx explained:

… as soon as … adverse circumstances prevent the creation of an industrial reserve army and, with it, the absolute dependence of the working class upon the capitalist class, capital, … rebels against the ‘sacred’ law of supply and demand, and tries to check its inconvenient action by forcible means and State interference.

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Moreover, Meszaros notes capital is an extra-parliamentary force that demands an extra-parliamentary response. Working class women are compelled to fight for their wellbeing in less hostile political economic arenas, where the control of private capital and the state is less pervasive.

Working class women’s disenchantment with the political system is intertwined with their experiences of wage labour. Following Engels argument, Marxist feminists claimed increased female labour force participation was essential to women’s liberation. While such developments meant the fortunes of middle class women improved, working class women were largely bypassed. Studies of the ‘feminisation of work’ euphemistically describe capital’s uneven and gendered immiseration of labour. More working class women have entered the paid labour force and have higher educational levels, but the circumstances of their employment continue to be stultifying. Deidre recalled:

[Dad] put me into business college and I stayed there for 12 months. And I done all those admin/secretarial sort of shit. …

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Came out of there with my wonderful diploma (sarcastic). First job ... I was the shit kicker clerk...
The next generation of working class women required a degree to perform the same work. Robyn, for example, was shocked at being unemployed for a year after graduating: ‘It was devastating. … What was all that Uni for? … Why aren’t people employing me?’ When she finally got an administrative job in the finance sector, she and her co-workers were rewarded with stress and disillusionment:

I was one of five resignations in the one week from my section... We hated the work. We felt unfulfilled. … There was also a lot of pressure … The work was boring and easy, but the pressure to get it done quickly and people screaming at you because of their own mistakes … we were better than that and we didn’t like the money we were on … round about $28,000 … but it was just ridiculous work. … I just didn’t know that was what working life would be like.

Their bitterness spoke of long-standing deceptions finally exposed. The prescriptions and promises of rewarding careers and financial comfort she had held since adolescence were shattered. Unable to afford retraining, Robyn knows a lifetime of unsatisfying toil is likely. In her study of American working class women Amott found: ‘Work for them was not a career, a satisfying route to self-actualization, but a fate they accepted in order to provide for their families.’

As discussed below, the women in this study were resistant, not accepting.

Notwithstanding, campaigns against workplace sexism, Zinn and Eitzin argue ‘…male domination has been more firmly entrenched in the social organization of work.’ In the present study, the women certainly had trouble with men at work, but in their capacity as

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32 Zinn and Eitzin, 1998, 236
managers rather than co-workers. Animosity was directed at all supervisors, irrespective of gender. The harassment, condescension and sexism Belinda experienced included bosses not only overseeing work discipline, but also insisting on their right to police the morality of their female employees. She explained the ideological pressures on women in the 1970s:

...the boss I had was what would you call ... set in their ways. When I fell pregnant he wanted to sack me because I wasn’t married. But actually I lost that one, and when I came back from the hospital he took me into his office and gave me the big lecture, you know, about how we don’t have unmarried mothers working in our company, blah, blah, blah. So when I fell pregnant again just before we got married I thought well I better leave now before he finds out again. ...everybody would look down on you if you worked; if they thought they should’ve been staying home looking after their family ... the family was neglected if they didn’t stay home...

Belinda was fortunate her husband worked full-time and she had extended family networks for extra support, thus enabling her to leave a difficult work situation. The rise in female-headed households, underemployment and the ‘working poor’ today has reduced working class women’s ability to escape intolerable working settings.

Thirty years later the specific issues may have changed, but sexism and workplace alienation remains common to and infuriating for working class women. Sandra, for instance, resented the degrading sexual politics and emotional pretension she was expected to participate in at a bank call centre in exchange for ‘pathetic’ wages:

It was so monotonous… you don’t care [about the customers] after a while… really boring, monotonous day after day after

day... [the manager – an ex-detective] ... was so up himself it was a wonder he could see... he had his favourite [female staff] he’d run to all the time, but if they weren’t there then he’d come and crawl, and I just couldn’t stand him at all... I find the [managers] that are higher up... tend to be all just big pompous jerks... mainly men...

Belinda, Sandra and other interviewees did not mention any workplace problems with male co-workers. Belinda left a job because of a male overseer:

we had an American Negro as supervisor... which doesn’t bother me at all, ... but it obviously bothered him ... When we first started, he got us altogether and told us it was ‘Roots in reverse’, that we were the slaves and he was the master. And he was young, he used to get around with his Walkman on, chewing his gum, clicking his fingers and thought he was really cool.

Deidre was incensed by the double standards and waste of public money she observed in her female-dominated workplace:

... there’s so many problems and not enough money to go round and yet all these politicians get how much per cent pay rise? Oh yeah, I know all the executives at [the department] just had a 4% pay rise and they didn’t even have to get a review. It’s pretty good!

Megan, a nurse, commented: ‘I’ve always had a problem with management ... I’m just bad with ... people in high positions who get paid good money, who don’t do the job.’

Robyn stated:

I found it very difficult to cope with the authority of full-time employment ... I didn’t like being told what to do a lot of the time and also being treated like I was a nobody... The [female] boss watched me like a hawk.

The women’s animosity was most vehemently directed at their middle-class overseers, who were predominantly, but not always, men. The denial of worker autonomy and industrial democracy weighed heavily on these women workers.
Surviving and resisting the alienation and exploitation of paid labour involved these women in various strategies to re-humanise the workplace, ranging from small-scale subversions to organised actions. The precariousness of working class life militates against the artificial separation of household, community and the formal political economy. None of these arenas alone is capable of supporting working people; rather they offer supplementary means of survival. Donaldson and others contend women workers actively integrate their involvement in the worlds of production and social reproduction.  

Donaldson suggests:

Perhaps the porous nature of working life, the refusal to see the locations of paid and unpaid work as unconnected, also fuels the desire for workplace humanisation, but in a way that is difficult to articulate since both gender segmentation and the breadwinner ethos promote a mutual incomprehensibility between workers and their formal trade union structures.

The narrowness of trade union agendas disappointed many of the interviewed women. Having been a staunch union supporter since her schoolyard protests against authoritarian teachers, Robyn was keen to get involved in the trade union movement on her first paid job. She had a glorified view of unions as fighters for the working class, fostered by her coal-mining grandfathers. When she started work with a finance corporation, union membership forms were included in her induction package, but management expressed their displeasure at her joining. She feels this was why she was not put in a work team like everyone else and why the boss kept a vigilant watch on her.

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This intensified her desire to become involved as a way of coping with the alienating conditions, but it took four months before she was advised her delegate was located in her section, by which time she was ready to quit. In her time on the job she was contacted twice on the union’s email list in relation to banking fees and train ticket sales. Notwithstanding her deflation at what union membership entailed, she retains her belief in the importance of solidarity on the job and with the socially disadvantaged.

While wages and conditions are vital, these working class women saw the paid workplace as only one site in their efforts to overcome the social suffering of their households and communities. Their workplace actions were aimed at subverting alienating work practices, building solidarity, establishing industrial democracy and autonomy, and harnessing workplace resources for social purposes. Sonya felt the unions should assist these efforts. She recalled one industrial action:

… it was sort of strikes and unionism and chocolate chip cookies (laughs) … it all goes together. … Unions began as the whole sort of looking after the working community and supporting families, you know, if the worker died or was ill. All of that extra sort of community based support I think … might be the thing that makes unionism more relevant and is perhaps one of the things that has become less of a priority … I know when I first started working as a checkout chick at Woolies … there were SDA picnic days and stuff like that … that all sort of added to the camaraderie of unionism in a way that wasn’t about agitation and activism. I thought it was … as important as the activism side of things.

She stressed the importance of seeing the goals of class emancipation in the course of struggle for better wages and conditions. The politics of hope and humanisation infused
these women’s workplace actions as they struggled to forge and maintain solidarities on a wider scale.36

Working class women discriminate between employers on the basis of wages and worker treatment, when they can. Deidre, for example, whose mother had died young and had no sisters, had limited female networks as a young woman. She had to navigate the labour force on her own. She specifically sought out workplaces where employees were treated like human beings and had some autonomy, intellectual and creative input. She remembered fondly one such job:

[They were] … just really, motherly, down to earth, anything you wanted sort of thing. You had a complaint? Air it. If we can’t do anything about it, we’ll tell you here and now. It was just a real open sort of atmosphere … So it was really nice, they were like a family, it was like a big family.

Not having pre-existing networks, the workplace offered Deidre the resources for creating them. The paid workplace was not just a source of income for these women; it was a place where social isolation might be overcome.

Deidre battled alienation by trying to ensure her labour had broader social meaning, in some way. For example, from her modest position as an administration worker she helped:

…build the child-care centre … when we found out the university had $400,000 tucked away for a childcare centre and we basically looked at each other and said well somebody should build it, and it was us. And that’s still standing today, so that’s good.

Deidre and her female workmates did not simply set out to satisfy their own childcare requirements, which could have been met with much less effort. They collectively took up this challenge for the betterment of unknown women worse off than themselves. Though Deidre’s paid positions were often routine and mundane she used the resources before her to stake claims for her household and community.

While Heather and Jackie had worked in the community welfare sector for many years, they were unimpressed with the charity mentality and bureaucratic hurdles to which their ‘clients’ were subjected. They practiced a covert solidarity with their communities. Though both women were tertiary-qualified, the precarious working conditions of the welfare industry and their working class culture reduced the social distance between themselves and those they sought to assist. As each had been on the receiving end of patronising and authoritarian models of welfare delivery, they attempted to circumvent official processes. Jackie, for example, often expedited welfare claims for people who did not quite fit the criteria. They provided fake references for resident’s needing employment. Heather redirected agency resources to buy food for families turned away by other relief agencies. They saw the socially disadvantaged as their foremost responsibility. They regularly subverted the administrative ‘logic’ and overt management priorities to address real community needs.

In other cases, working class women’s mutual aid networks were a source and benefactor of paid employment prospects. Belinda and Gina, for example, met through their neighbourhood networks. Later Gina was able to organise a job for Belinda at an inner suburban clothing warehouse. Though the work was menial and hazardous,
Belinda recalled it as the happiest period in her life, especially when they were on strike. She shared a unity with fellow workers that enabled them to keep the bosses at a distance through collective subterfuge of surveillance efforts and to anonymously retaliate against authoritarian overseers, for example. Belinda recalled the women would take extended toilet trips to compensate themselves for measly smoke breaks, which they would time to coincide with the most difficult packing jobs. Moreover it emboldened them to take industrial action to advance their entitlements and conditions. The strong sense of solidarity most women shared with co-workers was fostered by their connections outside the workplace. Union social functions where families were invited also helped cement allegiances. Management, on the other hand, was seen as a superfluous obstruction on their factory floor and in their offices.

For most women the job site was a place of camaraderie and freedom – an escape from domestic drudgery and isolation.37 The importance of financial and social independence that work provided was repeatedly raised. Deidre notes:

> I’ve never really been a ‘mum’ mum. Not that I’ve ever really been given the opportunity due to financial circumstances I suppose … I love my kids but I also wanted to find something, stability for me … (Denise)

In many cases, though, attempts to humanise, subvert or sidestep the boss are not possible. Sandra and Robyn both quit their jobs in disgust. Megan continues to battle the hospital administration for better hours and conditions alone. Workplace unity is often most difficult to achieve where it is needed the most.

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Many of the interviewees strived to be free of the boss’ control. Examining working class women’s survival tactics in the United States, Amott found that various strategies including self-employment and ‘moonlighting’ were tried.\textsuperscript{38} A number of the interviewees talked about their experiences of or desires to be self-employed and their various jobs ‘on the side’. Autonomy in their paid work and greater synchronicity between it and their home and community lives was a desire expressed by each respondent. Higher educational qualifications did little to reduce the exploitation and alienation many working class women experience at work.\textsuperscript{39} Megan, for example, had hoped to minimise the drudgery of waged labour by completing a nursing degree. She felt the substantial education debts and study time had not been worth the effort:

… doing shift work makes it extraordinarily hard … I’ll do three evening shifts a week sometimes in the next roster I’m doing five during the week and so if you’re doing an evening shift you don’t see any family at all … you work ‘til 10 or 11 o’clock at night and by that stage you’re ready for bed … Got my registration in December … and it began from there and I hated it! Hated every single second of it. … So work sucks.

Heather and Jackie dreamed of escaping waged labour by running a herb farm. Belinda relented to her husband’s wishes to start a video shop with his retrenchment package. ‘I could see that it wasn’t going to work but of course I’m a mere female so … I wouldn’t know.’ The shortage of local employment meant her husband had previously traveled a nightmarish four-hour round work trip, seven days a week. It stole over $100 from his weekly wage and a month out of his life every year. This left Belinda to take sole responsibility for domestic work. The strain was putting serious pressures on the

\textsuperscript{38} Amott, 1998, 244-245.
material and emotional wellbeing of her family and they were longing to escape bosses ‘who keep workers under the thumb,’ in Belinda’s words.

To these women self-employment was not about wealth generation, but contained their hopes of providing an autonomous living for their families, where few other avenues are available. However, in Belinda’s case, their minimal capital meant the bank effectively owned the business and they were in no position to keep up with competition when it inevitably arrived, forcing them to sell or go bust. Her husband went back to waged work to support the family and pay off the business loan. Belinda was compelled to work full-time and unpaid for two years in the business as it slowly collapsed. Her skills in ‘keeping two books’ helped save them from financial ruin. During this time their children and extended family were recruited to help with domestic chores and odd relief work at the shop. When the shop finally closed, the family was nonetheless in dire financial straits and Belinda was back in the unemployment line.

Many of the respondents had turned to the informal economy for paid work. Belinda and her daughter, for example, were forced to take work in a local sweatshop making cushions for a major retail chain for $5 an hour. Yet, even in this super-exploitative context Belinda exercised some sway over working conditions and job quotas because of the firms reliance on her cooperation to meet contract deadlines and her ability to ‘blow the whistle’ on their illegal operations. In another case, Sonya and her two school-aged children spent four nights a week folding advertisement brochures before rising at five the next morning for letterboxing. It only made financial sense because the job was ‘cash in hand’ and would not affect her sole parent pension, which the family barely survived
on. Moreover it was a job they could do in the suburbs that did not require transport. Similarly, Heather and Jackie ran an informal lawn mowing and remedial massage business within their community networks to supplement their unemployment benefits when out of work.

Formal jobs could be just as miserly. Heather and Jackie resorted to commission based supermarket demonstrating when unemployed only to find they were spending more money on travel and equipment than they was earning. Moreover, the casualisation of paid work made the juggling of social security benefits and wages difficult. Heather would only work ‘cash in hand’, unless the job was full-time. Most of these women had spent time in and out of the formal economy and had learnt not to rely on it for their survival. As indicated in the previous chapter, the Campbelltown formal economy is incapable of absorbing the local workforce. This structural limitation forces the creation of an underground economy as a survival strategy. Focusing on the exploits of capital in the formal labour force overlooks the magnification of hardships in its submerged alternate arena.

The preceding discussion provides some indication of why politics at the point of production has never been a central preoccupation of working class women. Though they have been willing participants in industrial disputes these actions are typically understood as intimately interrelated to the other political economic arenas in which they labour. This entails a political outlook and practice that extends beyond the conventional agendas of labour organisations. Bulbeck contends ‘women have perhaps a wider political repertory than men – environmental movements, peace movements,
neighbourhood action groups, welfare client groups.’

One of the reasons working class women’s politics has been dismissed is because their relationship to wage labour has traditionally been precarious and intermittent. Those marginalised from the formal economy do not have the industrial weapon of withdrawing their labour. McDonald claims

… the women’s movement and the contemporary Aboriginal struggle both underline the importance of economic participation as a necessary experience of social connection, a basis for political action. The inverse is the lack of a social movement.

It is important not to overstate the advances of the women’s and Aboriginal movement. McDonald’s view overlooks the political agitation and struggles outside the formal political economy that enabled women and indigenous people to increase their economic participation in the first place. These movements have benefited some of their constituents more than others and have made little dint on the power of capital over the working class people within their ranks.

Political theories that do not recognise the significance of other dimensions of working class life will find little resonance with working class women. Industrial power is but one important flank of the non-capitalist politics waged by working class women. No major social transformations have been achieved through this arena alone. Working

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class women know better than to waste too much of their precious resources tackling their oppression at the point where it is strongest, that is, the formal political economy.

**Responses to Community Structures**

Working class women’s labour and resistance resound across the formal political economy, their communities and households. The reproduction of tight-knit neighbourhoods or community networks was something the respondents devoted considerable time to. These reciprocal relationships ensured the well-being of those in trouble whenever possible and perpetuated a distinct value system and social outlook. Effective community management work formed the basis of collective battles over social resources. The women were not always successful in their endeavours. They often elicited seemingly harsh judgments of other working class women and men, while simultaneously tending to their material and emotional needs. These labours filled the space between the personalised struggles of the domestic arena and the depersonalised struggles of the formal political economy. They offered a bridge between the private and public worlds of women’s work – a domain where working class women came together to achieve common goals on their own, albeit embattled, territory.

The work of establishing and maintaining community survival systems is vital to the reproduction of labour – daily, generational and social.\(^4\) This labour includes, for

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example, creating safe social environments, caring for the vulnerable, guiding the young, repelling attacks on living standards and fighting for collective improvements. Some women prided themselves on the neighbourhood bonds they helped forge. Deidre explained that her suburb is

…pretty working class. … a heck of a lot of mum’s walking their kids to school. It’s very I’d say, hard. … You can see a lot of the families from around here … its their first home … There again, you’ve got the people next door … he should have been retired but he’s still working. …So you know there’s all sorts of people and yet our street is very friendly, open, hard working, all working class. But we all look after each other actually in this street. … we have street beers with the fellas and the girls sit out there with a coffee or a glass of wine or what have you. We have Santa come up the park, … and the Easter bunny … Everybody’s house gets involved. Any problems whatsoever you can always turn to somebody and say ‘hey I need help here.’

These sorts of connections take years to build. Deidre moved to Campbelltown in the first place because she had a girlfriend in the area. A decade later she was a respected figure in her homebuyer-dominated suburb. The relative stability of the population enabled their common threads of experience to coalesce into dependable associations.

In other suburbs the divisive effects of housing insecurity and severe poverty can take extraordinary efforts to overcome. Public housing tenants in various local studies expressed their distrust and fear of their communities.44 In this study, for example, Belinda could not get out of Airds fast enough. Yet women in this and other research,

like Sandra, reported no negative experiences during her time in Claymore. Indeed, tenants recently described Claymore ‘as a great place to live.’ One elderly female resident explained:

… I would never have moved into Proctor Way, … I knew people who wanted to leave the street, but couldn’t get out. Now I feel really proud of the place. I could walk this street at two in the morning and nothing would happen.

A crucial aspect of this transformation was the state’s relinquishment of some control and resources to local tenants. Residents were able to establish voluntary night patrols, staff a neighbourhood resource centre, and build communal gardens, for example. Within months, the once arson-stricken Proctor Way had a waiting list. On the other side of town at the Minto public housing estate women are again predominant amongst those fighting the dispersal of their neighbourhoods. The strong sense of ownership and control over these local areas is underscored by the community labour of longer-standing female residents.

These women saw themselves as custodians of the community, shepherding people out of harms way and preventing them from falling through the wide cracks created by the formal political economy. This may involve small acts of mutual aid such as giving large

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46 Leser, 1999, 45.


48 Luckett, 1994. Similar observations about the meaning of working class neighbourhoods are made in: Thomson, P. 1999. “That’s Where My House Is: Social Aspects of Urban Planning.” *Arena Magazine*, 42, 37-40. An interviewee noted of residents in Enfield (South Australia): ‘You get the feeling very strongly from them and their parents that they don’t want to move out of the area. They can be living in very poor conditions and it’s not their house, it’s not anything else that’s keeping them there, it’s their friends … if they don’t drive, if they don’t have a family and they don’t go anywhere, if they move somewhere else they could be really isolated. For some of them, that support network, their friends, that’s all they’ve got’ (Thomson, 1996, 39).
tips to pizza delivery drivers, as Sandra recalled, to housing the children of devastated families. Sandra would not hesitate to shelter young women in trouble: ‘If one of my daughters’ friends was kicked out of home I’d offer them a place to stay unless they were doing drugs, but if they were pregnant, sure.’ Deidre too believed she had responsibilities, not just to her own family, but also to the broader community, even if this entailed harbouring those who ventured outside the legal bounds. She explained:

… some of the women that I’ve met in the community have been very, very nice people. Very family-oriented, … you know, just normal general mums to like the lady up the road who takes in handicapped children, … she doesn’t have to do that, she’s a volunteer … [I’m] a mother, a trouble-shooter, and a problem-solver … You know some of the kids just needed a mother to talk to … Young women who have fallen pregnant and basically don’t know what to do, where to go, so I’ve basically been a silent partner in those sort of things. … uni students … ringing me up at two, three o’clock in the morning and ‘I’m at a pub and I think I’m ODing and I can’t tell my parents, can you come and get me.’ I’ve been from Wollongong to Penrith doing that, several times. I’ve had people sleeping on my lounge. I’ve had people sleeping on my steps that I didn’t even know were there until the next morning. They didn’t make it close enough to the door to knock, … blacked out on the stairs.

Robyn, Heather and Jackie also spoke of their efforts to secure black market goods and subvert the taxation and welfare regimes for the betterment of people in their family, community and class networks. Though these women did not discriminate between men and women in the provision of assistance, it was mainly women who were the providers and receivers of such help. These women are part of a submerged sea of sympathetic women guarding Campbelltown’s disadvantaged and criminalised.

While these women embraced the importance of solidarity and dignity, they were not acting out the traditional notions of self-sacrificing female martyrdom – though many
sacrifices are required for collective survival. Most of the respondents did not experience undivided motherly attention themselves and they consciously rejected the middle class models of doting parents. Rather they minister a practical, and at times tough, love reflecting the gravity of the issues at stake and the harsh decisions they face. Their advice and remonstrations are over life-altering matters like early pregnancy, abortions, domestic violence, sexual assault and material survival. For example, Heather, Deidre and Jackie had assisted women through pregnancy terminations. Deidre’s frustrated anxiety over the situation of teenage mums might easily be mistaken for condemnation:

… when I first moved out here … there was five young girls getting on [the train] from Minto … They all talked about their weekend: … ‘I think I’m pregnant this week so I’m going to put in for my forms this week.’ It was basically a race for these sixteen - seventeen year olds to basically get out of the family home, get into a housing commission place and get a pension. … that’s what they were brought up to believe they had to do … to know the system of how to get the dole, how to cheat the system, how to get the housing commission house, and how to get out of home quick, or how to get all the benefits…. That’s their mentality - to get out of home and hopefully things will be better for them. Oh no, I’m not going to be like that slag of a mother … I’ve heard it so many times, you know on the train … Drawing on her own experiences of class and gender, Deidre knows these young working class women do not have easy lives, but she questions the wisdom of pregnancy as a coping strategy. Heather had endured sexual assault and also understood the emotional, physical and material hazards young working class women must navigate. On the occasions when these young women have turned to Deidre and Heather for help they have provided shelter, advice, and solidarity.

Apart from advice and shelter, some of these working class women encouraged their menfolk to deal with violent men either through solicitude or as a last resort threatening to ‘knock his block off’ if the perpetrator harmed his wife again. Deidre discussed such a situation:

… they had a young family and … she was a nurse and … he was a real rough guy, very big, and she was this little, little person and he just didn’t know his own strength, and had a couple of beers and stuff like that and he’d get violent. .quite regularly I’d sort of have a few [words with her] … having a talk about it, you know just airing the problem and I kept on saying you ring a counselor and saying where she could go and all the rest of it …

On other occasions Jackie and Heather have accompanied women to refuges or stayed with them overnight for protection. These women see themselves as powerful actors within their class, survivors holding their families and communities together. Their understanding of motherhood and ‘sisterhood’ is communal, practical and political.

A crucial aspect of working class women’s community management labour is the seizing of collective resources from private capital and the state, often surreptitiously. In a myriad of everyday acts, these women cooperated for their mutual aid. This might entail concealing the identity and location of illicit activity, such as Robyn’s anxious watch over a local outwork factory that kept female family and friends employed while endangering their health. In exchange, Robyn was able to draw on community networks for emergency accommodation, casual jobs, transportation, financial and emotional assistance and support through medical crises. With the help of extended family and friends she was able to substantiate and slightly overstate her case of homelessness in
order to receive social security benefits so she could escape a difficult home life. These women were adept at extracting maximum revenue from the state, though it was typically a paltry sum.

Their expertise in avoiding state surveillance of underground activities was considerable. Those who had experienced unemployment, for example, systematically included friends contact numbers on dole forms as evidence of having looked for work. On the other hand, Jackie, Heather and Robyn often fabricated documentation for friend’s job or tenancy applications. Robyn, for example, applied for a lease in her own name on behalf of her sister’s girlfriends who ‘had difficulty finding a place to live in the area because they’d been evicted from every house that they’d ever rented’ for getting into arrears. Many had no qualms in falsifying public records, inventing addresses or bearing witness to non-events for official purposes to help someone in need. Jackie used several aliases for such occasions. In the context of police crackdowns, many provided refuge to friends, family and acquaintances known to be using or selling illicit drugs, usually marijuana sales. Robyn, though, refused to incriminate a friend’s daughter known to be trafficking amphetamines. Other resistances involved commandeering official resources for unofficial purposes. For example, as a representative on a local community organisation board, Robyn redeployed office equipment such as computers and photocopiers to assist working class students get through their studies, and successfully lobbied for a community transport service. As discussed further below, these women abided by their own ethical standards and values; formal legislation was implicitly

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understood as largely weighted against their interests and often as being without legitimacy in their everyday lives. Their largely disorganised and often underground civil disobedience keep their working class communities alive.

Others women instigated overt campaigns for a greater share of public resources. Denise, for example, resented being ‘taken advantage of as a consumer or as a person.’ Since childhood she had been told what she could not do because she was a girl and ‘not to get above her station.’ As an adult being denied entitlements, choices, or justice were more and more ‘like a red rag to a bull.’ In one instance, a school rezoning meant children from eleven local families would be uprooted from their schools and sent to the neighbouring suburb and they had no say over the matter. Denise started a one-person campaign to have the decision overturned, but when the other mothers heard about it they all joined in what turned out to be a successful action. She recalled in the beginning ‘nobody did anything. …I sort of led that thing. I felt really good. … from then I’ve been writing letters and complaining about all sorts of things … just being involved in things that got up my nose.’ These women were politicised by a small routine event in their lives that drew them together and gave them the confidence to continue demanding control over their lives and community.

Numerous women conveyed a gradual radicalisation through the curtailments and small victories they experienced. A local study, discussed in the previous chapter, explains how a network of mothers with children with disabilities formed themselves into an
informal lobby group to struggle for better resources.\textsuperscript{52} They sought out connections with the local university in the hope of gaining much needed services. One mother explained:

All those things the university can offer, we have to tap into them, you know. The OT [occupational therapist], they have that podiatrist thing there, you know. Why aren’t they using our kids or our people as... the practice? You know where the students go. That’s what I was more into getting ... where you could get a service to fill the gap ... that was missing all the time. ... and then hopefully [practitioners] would be skilled and instead of working in the cities ... they would work out here in the South Western Sydney area.\textsuperscript{53}

Other developments that the group pursued were a community school, advocacy skills training and most recently supported accommodation.\textsuperscript{54} To achieve these goals, the women had hoped professionals, workers, unions and academics would cooperate with them, but instead they found their informal organisation being overrun and coopted. One participant surmised ‘...it lost its way when the parents’ views became not as important. Quite often parents were pushed down when they tried to say something.’\textsuperscript{55} The women’s bid for control over community resources had limited success within the bounds of established services. The defeat of the group’s campaign was a setback. Nonetheless, the immediacy of their needs eventually propelled them back into political action with more militant claims and strategies learnt from previous lessons about the ‘repressive tolerance’ of the capitalist state.\textsuperscript{56}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Gill, et. al., 2004.
\item[53] Gill, et. al., 2004.
\item[55] Gill, et. al., 2004.
\end{footnotes}
Other women either through experience, intuition or lack of opportunity chose more covert means of usurping official resources. For example, Denise was involved with an adult education course with local unemployed women of mixed age and ethnicity, though the majority were public housing residents. The weekend workshop was designed to raise the confidence of women who had been out of work for some time by recognising the value of their life experiences as skills that could be sold in the labour market. The matter of women’s hidden unemployment was central, as were the barriers to work they encountered. Ostensibly the course represented an effort by these women to regain confidence after years out of the workforce. A young Anglo-Celtic woman in her twenties with a small child had completed many short courses, including bar service training. She sent her resume to over seventy relevant businesses between Liverpool and Campbelltown without a reply. An older woman had attended numerous ‘training courses’. She appeared resigned to the difficulties of finding employment and more interested in the weekend workshop as a break from home and family responsibilities. Nevertheless, she and other friends felt compelled to regularly check in at home in case of an emergency. During the evening news arrived that there had been a burglary in one of the women’s streets, an apparently common occurrence, triggering another round of phone calls. A third woman of non-English speaking background who was seeking a job worked in a community food garden at the local primary school. She was enthusiastic when asked about the garden, but lamented the lack of money for equipment and seeds.

Most of the women were using a course designed to help get women back into the workforce as a recuperative and networking strategy. The course offered an example of
the diverse ways in which working class women use community resources to meet their immediate needs, which often conflict with official objectives. The competing agendas were not lost on Denise who encouraged the women to get whatever they wanted out of the program, while she fended off the funding authorities with what they wanted to hear.

Similarly, a community arts initiative in a public housing suburb involved providing local residents with video production training in conjunction with a free social outing. On the first day twenty women turned up for the introductory session and a free lunch. A local community worker thought few of the women would complete the training as most came for the free lunch and others were interested in the free outing. The women’s priorities were food and relief from the strains of daily life, not video production skills. It was another example of working class women seizing hold of whatever resources came their way to serve their self-determined interests. Moreover, most of the women attending both of the above projects had done so as a collective action drawing on pre-existing social networks.

Corresponding with Campbell’s observations of working class women in England, these women acted in ‘the working-class tradition of militant self-help … [involving] new skills, new control and a new way of life with each other.’

For example, when Heather and Jackie moved to the area they went out of their way to build local connections. Having worked in many grassroots activist organisations and community jobs elsewhere, they were disappointed with the comparatively conservative and remote welfare sector in Campbelltown. When they attended a local working class feminist forum (discussed

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57 Campbell, 1984, 203.
in Chapter Three) their hopes of building activist networks with women from the community faded.

However, with several others, they formed the core of the Women’s Group with the intention of providing an arena for working class women to meet and discuss social and political issues. The meetings quickly grew in size through word of mouth and some women were keen to organise small-scale community campaigns around issues such as inadequate public transport and unemployment. One of the developments to emerge from the women’s group was an informal food cooperative. Several of the women brought excess produce from Flemington markets to distribute to women in the group. From this exchange a number of women agreed to form an informal bulk food-buying group. Within weeks Heather and Jackie were distributing a car-load of food each week. Over the ensuing months the number of co-operators and orders grew with more members involved in running the operation. This instance demonstrates working class women’s skills in detecting and grasping the precarious and fleeting opportunities for resource control that come their way.

Though their collective efforts put more nutritious food on the tables of working class households, it was not sufficient to end the material insecurity that eventually forced Heather and Jackie to move from the area. Their efforts to build fortifying links between the various arenas of struggle they were involved in (community, workplace, union, environment) were to no avail. They found the narrow agendas of unions and other non-government organisations prevented them from establishing alliances to achieve their objectives because they were an informal and unorganised group of working class
women. Their departure saw the rapid demise of the cooperative and the Women’s Group. Robyn described a similar experience in helping a female friend set up a local youth group:

…the local council tried to take over, didn’t like the way that my friend was running it … my friend [was] trying to encourage the youth … to take it over themselves … she’s set it up, got a few contacts, got a few sponsors, got a few grants and gave them a few ideas and then handed it over to the kids to do what they want … the council didn’t like this girl, they didn’t like her ideas, they thought she was subverting the youth in the area. They wanted the kids to do what they, the council, want them to do, which no kid is interested in doing…

As with all of the above projects, working class women are denied formal control over social resources and where they established their own informal strategies they are denied support. As Katz argues, the state casts them as the deserving poor ‘as long as they remained supplicants rather than militants, objects of charity rather than subjects of protest.’ As Marcuse has contended, ‘It is the people who tolerate the government, which in turn tolerates opposition within the framework determined by the constituted authorities.’ In such a society ‘even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite to the degree to which they accept the rules of the game.’

The unspoken value system driving working class women’s cooperation and struggle is borne of such subjugations. Freire has argued oppression produces both a motivation for, and a fear of, liberation. Repression unites and divides those in its web, producing contradictory moral codes. Some of the structural limits on working class women’s

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60 Marcuse, 1965.
thoughts and actions were canvassed in the previous chapter. The following passages focus on the elements of refusal and resistance emanating from their testimonies.  

The principal of giving that which is possible to the common good and taking that which is necessary stems from experiences of scarcity and vulnerability. The irrationality of market promises to satisfy all human needs found no converts amongst these women. Insatiable commodification and the economic gradations of human worth were similarly scorned. None included the accumulation of great wealth in their list of life priorities.

While the formal marketplace remains an essential mechanism for the provision of material and increasingly emotional needs working class women are less able to countenance its thrall. Denise argued against the increasing economism she observed:

...there used to be the personnel department and now we’ve got human resource management. ... it’s just a different brass plate on the door. ... the whole idea that now you’re not a person, you’re a human resource. You may as well be stockpiling ... you turn on the news and its ... about the price index or the numbers stuff that I don’t even understand... that commercialism ... capital ... How that’s changed and we didn’t even notice.

As Marx argued, the expansion of capital has impoverished the working classes, but in far more than material terms.  The emotional desolation attached with being superfluous to human society, of possessing creativity and capabilities that are dispensable, is perhaps a more ruinous pauperisation than inadequate food and shelter.

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63 In Seabrook, 1993, 203.

Some comments revealed the internalisation of capital’s tendency to reduce social relationships to financial transactions. Some women conveyed the dread of becoming ‘unpersons, by that most delicate and violent of suppressions, by being deprived of a livelihood.’ As previously mentioned, unemployment left Gina suicidal and Robyn severely depressed. Sandra felt compelled to justify and emphasise her temporary dependence on the same social system that denies her the means for self-reliance.

When I left [my son’s] father I was five months pregnant and I got an AVO [Apprehended Violence Order] against him… … it was a breeze and the government gives you so much money… no, it was damn hard – really, really, really hard, … you just have to do what you have to do… I always only saw it as an interim thing … that was my period to say ‘I’m sorry I’m sponging off everyone but pretty soon I’ll be qualified and paying everyone else.’ … I thought it was good because it enabled me to at least have some sort of life, to get to Uni, to get [my son] looked after at day care. So I was always grateful for it. Plus I had worked … where I was paying quite a lot of tax … I felt I’d paid some of it… All my family worked … I never felt guilty in that way… [The stigma] never affected me ‘cause that wasn’t my life… [The pension’s] …not a lot and you don’t have any respect on it whatsoever…you don’t have any self-respect, but at that stage you don’t care about self-respect, you care about a roof over your head and food.

The emotional and spiritual price of receiving these meagre material provisions was the reduction of her social standing and self-esteem. The privatisation of alienation is based on the mystification of unemployment and poverty as individual failings rather than ‘collateral damage’ from economic growth under capitalism.

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65 Seabrook, 1993, 163.
67 Seabrook, 1993, 203.
The importance of family as a source of personal meaning is intensified for working class women whose sense of worth is rarely validated beyond the home and community. In Sandra’s case above, that she emphasised her connection to tax-paying family members conveys her understanding of being part of broader material and emotional unit beyond her immediate four walls. This supports Donaldson’s argument about ‘fictive kinship’ and the family-household survival system. He contends: “Fictive kinship”, the bringing of friends into family resource sharing outside market relations, is most important for the sharers whose resources are fewest. Belinda, for example, explained the merging of family and community networks in the formation of her support system:

The older you get the more you go back to the traditions of when you were a child. We were a close family and community. …We’ve all bought a block of land in the same area to retire to – to be like the old days. …a sense of community that we will all be there for each other in our old age.

The associative community is an extension of their material and emotional survival system. It is a source of sustenance, defence and, when possible, social transformation. The perpetuation of collective notions of well-being undercuts the forces of atomisation and privatisation disseminated by capital.

The failure to stem the tide of human suffering in the midst of perpetual economic growth and apparent riches, has led these working class women to contest the logic of endless accumulation. Sonya, for example, felt the country had become ‘a consumer driven, materialistic society.’ Sally, a primary school teacher, contended: ‘any teacher who teaches really for teaching doesn’t do it for money. … if you wanted to be rich you

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68 Donaldson, 1991, 64.
69 Donaldson, 1991, 64.
wouldn’t be a teacher.’ After several years living in public housing, Sandra won a substantial amount of money from Lotto. With a new blended family of seven, the money soon evaporated after the house was purchased. The experience confirmed for Sandra the hollowness of material affluence:

… I’m of the attitude now that if you’ve got it you’ve got it, and if you don’t, you don’t … why have a $100 in the bank… it’s not going to do much… we’re quite happy toddling around in our life, just doing the basic stuff…

Despite the material constraints, these women do not dream or scheme ways to generate vast wealth. On the contrary, Heather and Jackie’s vegetarianism and backyard food gardening were part of their broader contribution to a greener planet and retrieval of some control over it. Though they were often in penury they would reduce what food they bought in order to afford more expensive non-toxic or biodegradable brands. These women made humble claims on social and environmental resources.

Some explained the craft of making ends meet with finite resources and the sense of satisfaction that could be gained from such ingenuity. Denise learned from her father that you ‘never pay full price.’ She explains with pride that her family has always been ‘really good at being poor.’

We used to have parties all the time. A little bit of jam, a bit of celery, a party pie, a frankfurter, a plate full of all this stuff. … a ‘party dinner’ was, if I look back on it now, when you didn’t have anything. You just threw together what was left, bits and pieces. … [My father] would never buy anything, because he knows where you can get it cheap, or he’ll go into the store … he’ll talk anyone down and he’s very proud of it.

When she had her own family and home to maintain, Denise’s local networks were a store of information on where to get bargains and who would do what for a ‘slab of
Reciprocally, she often did haircuts and her husband fixed hot-water services, ‘cash in hand.’ Now she is divorced and poorer these skills are essential:

… I’ve bought one pair of shoes, a $6 shirt from a factory … everything else I’ve bought at op shops … I would be lucky if I’ve spent $50 all year on clothes. And I’ve never had such a good wardrobe … I never pay full price.

Many of the respondents railed against disposable consumerism and complained about adulterated or shoddy goods and ‘planned obsolescence.’ Used furniture, ‘hand me down’ clothes, excess backyard produce and money were all recycled through community networks or sent off to charity outlets. Very little was dispensable in these women lives and they could not tolerate the waste and extravagance they were daily induced to partake in.

Even with the best survival skills, the cost of living has escalated to the point that most of the respondents have been forced into debt to meet basic expenses. Donaldson notes working class households have been ‘cautious’ credit users and ‘avoided having a credit card at all.’ Yet, Denise was forced to relinquish her ‘belief that if you couldn’t afford to pay cash for it, you can’t pay it back.’ Many of the women today relied on credit to buy food, pay rent and in Robyn’s case, to buy a bed and a cheap car for work. Set against these material hardships, advertising and marketing claims of personal

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70 Donaldson (1991, 63) recorded similar processes. See also Lowenstein, 1997.

71 Marcuse (1965) argued: ‘The toleration of the systematic moronization of children and adults alike by publicity and propaganda, the release of destructiveness in aggressive driving, the recruitment for and training of special forces, the impotent and benevolent tolerance toward outright deception in merchandizing, waste, and planned obsolescence are not distortions and aberrations, they are the essence of a system which fosters tolerance as a means for perpetuating the struggle for existence and suppressing the alternatives.’

deliverance through commodities, rings hollow and callous.\textsuperscript{73} These women’s daily experiences testified to the impossibility of material extravagance for all and the social and ecological destructiveness of its pursuit.

Their immersion in the pervasive effects of social inequality, amidst opulence and conspicuous consumption gives force to a moral creed grounded in tenets of equality, autonomy and collectivism. As indicated in the previous chapter, many respondents ridiculed aspirations of material and social superiority.\textsuperscript{74} Some sacrificed material gains to avoid what they saw as class betrayal. Belinda contended ‘inequality of money and power’ lay at the root of the social suffering around her and it was in keeping with these beliefs that her husband ‘didn’t become staff … you would be looked at differently by workers and [we] didn’t want that.’ Jackie resigned from a well-paid secure government job because she disapproved of their dehumanisation of ‘clients’. She recalled how the in-tray on the customer service desk reserved for single mothers read ‘slags’ and the in-tray for unemployed people read ‘losers’. Robyn too left a full-time finance job in the city: ‘Thought I’d leave the nest … go off in the city … have a huge exciting life and career … When it boils down to it, I really just like being close to [the family] home … the quiet life.’ Sally could not see how her work as a primary school teacher ‘is more important than what someone does at a railway station.’ Others rejected any links between formal higher education achievements and class superiority. Denise argued: ‘I think that’s a lot of bullshit … somebody that can live on $200 a week and feed six kids,

they’re smart.’ Underpinning these sentiments and actions is a strong belief in the intrinsic equal worth of people and a sense that money and official accolades cannot satisfy the fundamental human needs for belonging and meaning, and may even prevent their fulfillment.  

While they may feel powerless to curtail the extravagances of the rich, most of these women put considerable energy into helping those worse off than themselves and working together on common grievances or initiatives, usually at the local level. The number of respondents involved in community welfare work, for example, conveys their motivation to address the effects of social inequality, and the pain of realising the limitations of this work. Though half of the respondents in this study worked or volunteered in welfare and community jobs, all had abandoned it or were trying to. Belinda’s sentiments were typical: ‘I don’t want to take on other people’s problems, I’ve got my own.’ Denise found the welfare sector ‘too heavy’. Heather and Jackie believed the industry debased the process of caring and the people involved. They could not see how genuine solidarity, understanding and trust could be purchased and what dollar value should be placed on it. How do you fit it neatly into a forty-hour week? Gina too found the exploitation of volunteers in the ‘caring’ industry particularly galling. Though Sandra respected those who gave of themselves selflessly for the common good, she saw the commodification of caring as corrosive and corrupting so that ‘most people would not do anything unless it’s in their own interest.’ Moreover, the human salvation trade

registers deep disruptions in working class communities. Seabrook contends, ‘In the West, it is the human commons that have been enclosed and privatized, and sold back to us as service, and as this happens, supports of neighbourhood, ties of blood and kinship are swept away.’

Capitalism has traditionally rested upon the role of working class women as the familial safety valve on its dehumanising and alienating effects. Zaretsky and Ansley have suggested women’s emotional labour diffuses class confrontation; by absorbing class frustrations and diverting conflict it is argued the struggle for necessary structural changes is avoided. Yet today, as households and communities continue to atomise and women’s energies are redirected to greater burdens at home and work, the conditions for this process are torn asunder. The welfare industry is an unsatisfactory substitute buffer zone. The danger for capital is that working class women are increasingly incapable of and resistant to cushioning the blows of capitalism, leaving the injuries of class unattended. As individual resistances to the rule of capital are swept aside and rendered less effective, and the state falters in its attempts to stabilize labour, the importance of working class women’s networks and collective actions intensify.

Most of the women argued for collective responses to the social suffering around them. Sonya explained her hopes for a society of ‘… equality and egalitarianism and looking after your fellow man. …any political activism and political interest that I have is focused on people in general rather than my own individual rights or ability to

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77 Seabrook, 1993, 163.
succeed…’ Sally believed social change was only achievable ‘as part of a group like, an organised group …I have more influence that way.’

Working class women dominated the pursuit of collective goals. Robyn stated: ‘I believe that woman have an ability to be considerate and cooperative with other people and … I have a faith in a certain solidarity amongst women…’ Denise also noted in her neighbourhood ‘the women forged a network, and they were the ones that said ‘let’s have a party on Saturday,’ and that’s how the men knew each other.’ She viewed these networks as ‘a way of coping’ in the resource starved working class estates of Campbelltown. Sonya explained how neighbouring that involved the sharing of knowledge on social and political issues, was just as important. She saw her higher education as a resource to be distributed within her community:

…so that all of us can make a difference by knowing what it is that we’re talking about … I was at a barbecue … with about thirty people sitting around while I explained the whole Indonesia/East Timor thing …’.

Robyn became a student activist through the urgings of friends. She thought ‘this is an avenue where I could …make a difference.’ She involved her family and friends in various campaigns for accessible higher education. These experiences reinforce the findings of other studies that argue women are central figures in the creation and maintenance of mutual aid and solidarity networks.80 Women are more likely to organise

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care of family and friends and social gatherings, that is, the foundation work of alliance formation and the reproduction of the values.  

In a society that offers few unsolicited avenues of communication to working people, the informal transmission of experiences of life under capitalism is essential. The labour of working class women as transmitters of knowledge and values is often overlooked and undervalued. Tebbutt contends:

… denigration of [women’s] talk can be seen as part of the ideological undermining of working-class culture which encouraged working-class people, and women especially, to undervalue themselves and their activities. Gossip expressed the politics of everyday living, and as such was an important vehicle for the informal power, which women of the urban poor often exerted over their neighbourhoods, since they had few other channels through which to express themselves. This function reinforces the importance of a broad definition of political life if the complexity of women’s political experience is to be properly understood.

The women in the present study were aware of the forces that sought to engineer their self-perceptions and worldviews. Denise stated:

…the messages we get from around us, from history, …and the media, the newspapers tell us [who] we are, and what the church has said in the past, and what we learn at school – I think all these things form us and they kind of control us inadvertently. …who benefits from some of the laws, or from some religious moral values?

Rowbotham has argued that working class women, ‘while not theoretically conscious, could still be a source for an alternative vision of social and economic transformation.’

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82 Tebbutt, 1995, 11.
They have for centuries debated ‘how everyday understandings, the tacit forms of knowledge embedded in activity, could be generalized and coordinated into a wider social knowledge. The working women of 1848 knew very well that part of subordination was the feeling, “we know nothing.”’\(^{84}\)

When it came to community battles Denise commented ‘men look on, they don’t care … I know that men live in the community too, but the community in the day time, are predominantly female.’ These female associations and information sharing formed the basis of struggles over everyday difficulties like extra bus-stops to increase people’s mobility, school issues and improving public safety. These words echo Seabrook’s observations on the greater resignation towards defeatism and flight by working class men.\(^{85}\) This is, in part, attributable to the ideological force of the male breadwinner ideology that diminishes men’s self-perception of what they are worth, what they can legitimately do and what matters in life. Donaldson suggests: ‘So rigid is this expectation that there have been rising levels of “breadwinner suicides” and despair in unemployed men, indicating that many men cannot relinquish the breadwinner task without damaging themselves.’\(^{86}\) The implications on community struggles may be that men see them as less important, leaving this work to working class women, when solidarity is needed.

It is the stunting of the imagination and confidence by a social system that has no use for their full human potential, as much as material matters, that working people battle to

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84 Rowbotham, 1995, 75.
overcome. For these women, self-empowerment was regained through collective experiences as much as individual effort. Denise argued: ‘It’s the little bits of success that have been big successes for me, that have … instilled the thing about collective and about lobbying.’ Denise believes if small local incursions on their communities like child care closures and dangerous neighbourhood planning are not resisted, ‘if you accept all that stuff, then you’ll accept the GST.’ Denise knew the difficulty of motivating people to united action. She referred to the considerable public debate and demonstrations over the Badgery’s Creek Airport proposal as being ‘a good start’ in mobilising public participation on social issues. The notion of repressive tolerance is relevant. Only changes within the system rather than its total transformation are permissible under capitalism. Denise’s argument was about the work required to build organisations and forces from the ground up that are capable of larger systemic changes and how forging social liberation may lead to self-emancipation.

In sum, this section offers a reckoning of the abundance of survival and resistance strategies working class women employ in their beleaguered communities. It is an arena of the broader political economy that supplements the claims they make on the formal marketplace and provides some shelter from the toll it extracts in return. The main thrust of their labours in the community are the forging of defensive alliances through fictive kinship networks, using those networks to acquire maximum community control over social resources at minimum risk, and reproducing social values concordant with working class interests.

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87 Marcuse, 1965.
Responses to Domestic Structures

Many of working class women’s resistances beyond the home necessarily reverberate through and, in some senses, spring from struggles for survival and meaning inside the home. Experiences of family can be simultaneously restrictive and liberating. In the pursuit of personal and social well-being in a social system that runs counter to those interests, they continually collide with and defy socially ascribed roles in the domestic sphere. In the process of self-discovery, familial relationships and structures are contested and often reconfigured.

Supporting Baxter’s findings of more egalitarian tendencies in working class homes, most women in this study insisted on a fair distribution of work with their partners, though the younger respondents seemed to have more equal arrangements. To some extent the organisation of domestic work has also been changing in response to the feminisation of work, with working class women in Campbelltown sometimes finding it easier to obtain work than their male partners. Megan, Robyn and Deidre’s partners contributed a considerable amount of time to domestic work though never quite as much as themselves, though these women were the main breadwinners of their families. Though Sandra’s partner was the main breadwinner, he regularly performed a second shift of housework, childcare and maintenance at home. Yet with five children, they struggle to keep up:

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He’ll come in … he’ll tidy up … I’m not naturally neat, for me it is a huge effort… I do most of the cooking, I do most of the washing, ironing, which I hate … I finally got up to date this weekend…

Two of the seven respondents with male partners expressed dissatisfaction with their contribution and the on-going battle to get them to help more. In some instances, women stopped their partners from doing the housework because their domestic incompetence (real or feigned) was counter-productive. Two of the other respondents were a childless lesbian couple that performed an equal share of the housework. The remaining three were sole parents or lived alone and took full responsibility for domestic work. In each case where male partners were present, the domestic division of labour was viewed as an important power struggle within the home. Yet, all of the women (partnered or not) were as concerned with challenging the social norms and stereotypes about women’s domestic work.

Their battle against ideological containment of working class women as mothers, daughters and partners was a significant battle for them. To varying degrees these women did not imagine themselves as living in complete suburban isolation cut off from the social world. As indicated above, the household was perceived as part of a broader survival system involving extended relations and friends outside of the home. These ties offered points of comparison and reinforced principles in terms of interpersonal relationships, coping strategies and the intrinsic worth of women’s labour in the domestic realm. Angry at the devaluation of women’s domestic work in society Belinda, 

91 Donaldson (1991) makes similar observations.
for example, wryly contemplated the turmoil that would be created ‘if all us housewives went on strike.’ 92 Her isolation in the home did not prevent her from perceiving the privatisation of labour reproduction as a collective experience.

The labour of consumption involved particularly intense ideological conflicts for these women. While all women are subject to advertising and marketing ploys, working class women experience most keenly the gap between what is on offer and what is affordable and desirable. Sally explained her sister and brother-in-law were an affluent couple living in Glen Alpine:

...they have the kind of lifestyle where if they want something they can just go and buy it. As I said to my sister the other day at the shop, I’d love to be able to just see something at the shop and know I can just buy it if I want to. And she said, ‘well I can do that.’

Though Sally earns a primary school teacher’s wage she must monitor her consumption and is vulnerable to any long-term disruption to her wage. She has little choice of what she must buy, unlike her sister who can buy whatever she likes and for whatever reason. Yet, as a single childless woman Sally was less subjected to the ideological barrage directed at working class mothers; it is perhaps emotionally easier to withstand individual wants than to deny the desires of loved ones.

The historical construction of motherhood is intricately linked to the expansion of commodity fetishism. 93 Messages about maternal responsibilities, from correct breastfeeding techniques to the social purity of the nation, were foisted upon women

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through widespread propaganda campaigns utilising the mass media, state health practitioners, academics, and the church. Matthews argues:

The concomitants of maternity for Australian women became fear and guilt. … The child’s earliest experiences were of fundamental significance in forming its adult character. … If the child grew up to be bad or sad, depraved or deprived, evil or incompetent, it was all mother’s fault. Since no child was ever perfect, mothering became, by definition, an impossible task.

The requisite sensitivity to the needs and wants of children entailed the purchase of fashionable children’s clothes, colour-coordinated nursery accessories and, of course, endless toys. The ‘ideal mother’ is irredeemably middle class.

The kitchen was cast as the vital site for the incubation of a classless liberal democratic polity. In the post-war period the promotion of ‘sensitive’ mothering was a reaction by the social sciences ostensibly to avert totalitarianism, which was blamed on bad mothering (read working class mothering). Insensitive mothers allegedly raised insensitive children and eventually adults. The regulation of working class children entailed the regulation of their mothers. According to developmental psychologists, women who were not completely devoted to meeting the wishes of their children were ‘insensitive’. Belinda remembers her resistance to the pressures of ‘good mothering’:

… being a wife and a mother is being a slave to your children and your husband and I’m sorry but that’s not my idea of being married and I wasn’t, you know, gonna jump … you had to be there for their beck and call and I wasn’t prepared to do that … I wasn’t a good wife… everything that went wrong was my fault … [my mother-in-law] used to tell the kids that I neglected them. … I didn’t jump when they

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94 Matthews, 1984, 78-81.
95 Matthews, 1984, 79.
cried. If I kept their good clothes for when they went out and
so just put yard clothes on them and she happened to turn up
on the day: ‘Why haven’t you got these kids dressed nicely?’
‘Well there only playing out in the dirt.’ … I was the worst
in the world.

Working class women were disciplined in the art of bourgeois nurturing in order to fulfil
their role as the ‘civilising heart’ of brutish working class families.\textsuperscript{98} They were to
impart ‘middle-class standards of correct behaviour: punctuality, regularity, diligence,
thrift, sobriety, standard language, uniform dress, patriotism, respect for authority.’\textsuperscript{99}
Failure to perpetuate these often-alien values and costly practices out of school hours
often elicited state intervention from child welfare or educational authorities.

Women who could not manufacture the idyllic childhood – carefree, limitless,
autonomous, and individualistic – were authoritarian.\textsuperscript{100} Substantial resources of time,
energy and income were required to produce a healthy, obedient and ‘sensitive’ child.
The high maintenance of this fiction rested hopelessly on working class women’s
labours and inevitably demeaned them for their apparent shortcomings in meeting these
material imperatives. The legacy still weighs on Belinda’s mind:

… the [cousins] were always better off than we were, you
know financially, and I found it hard when we got together,
that my kids had to miss out on things that her kids were
doing, or her kids were better dressed than my kids… I think
my feeling of inferiority got passed onto the kids. I think
they sort of felt a bit inferior too because I did. … but I felt
for them, ….’cause I mean … my nieces had nice designer
jeans and [my kids] were all running around in tracksuits. …
I felt like they were the poor cousins.

\textsuperscript{98} Matthews, 1984, 80.
\textsuperscript{99} Matthews, 1984, 84.
\textsuperscript{100} Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989.
Working class women have to economise child-rearing resources and often seek to prepare, rather than shield, their children for the limiting experiences of working class life that most would never leave. Not all needs and wants could be met. People had to pool resources and often deny desires and ambitions. The bitter side of working class life involved unfulfilled potential, thwarted dreams, poor health, and wearing old too young.

In the eyes of middle-class psychologists, teaching children how to cope with the strictures of working class life instilled undemocratic and authoritarian behaviours that were alleged to create dictatorial personalities. A mother’s refusal of children’s wants and demands was blamed for everything from maladjusted adults to the rise of despotism. Theories of maternal deprivation gained immense ideological power in the post-war years. Allport argues the ideology was designed to force women out of the workforce after the Second World War and back into the home to reproduce future generations of labour, thinly disguised by ‘populate or perish’ rhetoric. The reality for some working class women has been insufferable pressure to meet the contradictory and unattainable standards of material and moral propriety. Notwithstanding her love for her children Denise found being a mother and wife soul shattering:

> I always felt that I didn’t stack up … [motherhood’s] supposed to be all warm and fuzzy and stuff … it’s not like it’s supposed to be, but then it’s feeling guilty that you’ve done something wrong to make it like this, ‘I’m a bad mother, I’m a bad housewife, I’m a bad cook, I’m a bad person, I’m a bad domestic housekeeper, I’m a bad woman’, you know. … [There’s] not much left to be good at, plus

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104 Allport, 1984.
I’ve been told all my life that I’m ‘bad, bad, bad’, or stupid or fat or ugly or useless, you know, the whole gamut of stuff. And all the guilt that’s attached to that, ‘shit I can’t do anything right’ … I’m shit scared about a lot of things … at the same time I feel like I do have some free will, I guess … imagining the future … that in itself, is … a way of coping.

Guilt, fear and blame are manipulated by the state, the church and industry to coerce working class mothers to simultaneously and impossibly produce insatiable consumers, and disciplined workers and citizens. Blaming authoritarianism on working class mothers concealed the bourgeoisie’s overriding concern to promote commodity fetishism and suppress opposition to the unrelenting accumulation of capital. Working class children were no longer to be steeped in the counter-hegemonic knowledge and memory of working class struggle and culture. As indicated in the previous chapter, working class women have been intently watched, cajoled and demonised in part to undermine the social reproduction of non-capitalist values and practices.

Yet, Matthews makes the point that the weight of regulatory and marketing pressure from reformers and merchants is a measure of the strength of oppositional practices and culture amongst the working class communities that they were seeking to control. For instance, while the Meadow Lea hawkers may believe they reflect ‘typical mums’, their marketing was offensive to Denise who questioned their depiction of motherhood in advertisements. She asked why a woman ‘ought to be congratulated’ for cooking with margarine, when she receives so little recognition for anything of importance that she does? Rowbotham noted for working class women motherhood can often be a transformative experience prompting critiques of social institutions and processes.

106 Matthews, 1984, 88.
previously taken for granted. In these instances motherhood takes on a radical aspect, rather than the usual conservative portrayals.\textsuperscript{108}

Some women consciously rejected commodity addiction as a road to fulfillment. Heather and Jackie, for example, always grew food in their backyard or in pots if room was unavailable and if they had to buy food they boycotted genetically modified products. They are motivated by the hope of an alternative, more humane and ecologically sound society. This is a goal they consciously work towards on a daily basis in the belief that social change is not only about structures, systems and parties, but also about doing things differently in everyday life. As discussed previously, these women display a greater, though not total, resilience to the socialising impact of consumer culture because the realities of daily life expose advertisers’ myth making. The advancement of childhood fantasies of freedom and individualism was a marketing strategy for the expansion of private capital and a political strategy for the repression of non-capitalist ideologies and practices.

Socialisation theory has been used to explain the gendered division of domestic labour, and has similarly played down working class women’s agency. For example, in arguing patriarchal hegemony is achieved through ‘sex role socialisation’, Bryson accentuates men and women’s complicity in the subordination of women and overlooks their resistance to dominant ideologies.\textsuperscript{109} Feminist scholars such as Dorothy Dinnerstein and

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\textsuperscript{108} Rowbotham, 1995, 74.

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Nancy Chodorow have emphasised the processes through which women internalise and reproduce gender stereotypes.\textsuperscript{110} Chodorow’s work on the reproduction of mothering investigated the gendered socialisation of children.\textsuperscript{111} She was interested in how women as primary carers socialised boys and girls differently. Chodorow reasoned because girls have a biological and social affinity with their mothers they feel at ease with their physical and social identity. Boys are socially required to develop a non-female identity and therefore must alienate themselves from the social world they knew as infants. The absence of shared parenting and the corresponding predominance of women in these responsibilities

...creates a psychology of male dominance and fear of women in men. It forms a basis for the division of the social world into unequally valued domestic and public spheres, each the province of people of a different gender.\textsuperscript{112}

There are some difficulties with Chodorow’s hypothesis. As Beasley has noted many psychoanalytic approaches position either the mother or father as the dominant agent of sexual socialisation when both (where present) have contested influence over the child.\textsuperscript{113} The approach assumes greater differences between, than within, the sexes. It does not account for historical and cultural variations in gendered experiences and understates women’s bid for self-liberation.\textsuperscript{114} The structural construction of motherhood, families and sexualities is overlooked.\textsuperscript{115} Is it not possible that accommodation and apparent deference are legitimate strategies of resistance? Is it not

\textsuperscript{110} Cited in Matthews, 1984, 12.
\textsuperscript{111} Cited in Haralambos, et al., 1996, 469.
\textsuperscript{114} Beasley, 1994, 95.
possible that working class women have the intelligence to make the best use of the often-measly resources around them for their own liberation?

Socialisation theory attributes men, as the oppressor, with an irpressible economic rationality proven by their avoidance of domestic labour, while women, as the oppressed, are denied rationality or intelligence in their conditional and tactical compliance with sexual divisions of labour. The women in this study were less concerned with challenging the sexual allocation of specific tasks than getting men to do more in general. As Donaldson has suggested, this may well be a deliberate strategy because ‘claiming that women can do men’s work may end up with them doing it too, as well as their “own.”’ Belinda, for example, found that her demand for equal control over household finances resulted in her being saddled with full responsibility. The ongoing discrepancy between male and female wages, for example, often prescribes the allocation of waged and domestic work within working class families. Bryson’s recommendation that more women should enter the workforce while more men should move out of it, at least partially, to allow greater equality in the domestic realm, overlooks the requirement in working class households of two full-time incomes for survival. Irrespective of which sex does the domestic work, the impoverishment of working class households has not changed.

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118 Bryson, 1988, 146-149.
The class specificities of the domestic division of labour are too often overlooked.\textsuperscript{119} The daughters of wealthier families have greater access to higher education, influential social networks, family assets, better transportation options, labour-saving devices, childcare and higher wages should they choose to seek employment. These resources enable them to reproduce their affluence and to outsource domestic responsibilities to housekeepers, boarding schools and nannies, if they wish. Working class women are more likely to be the home help than in a position to purchase it.\textsuperscript{120} None of the women in this study received any paid help in the home, though some had been paid by more affluent women to maintain gardens and care for children.

Engels had anticipated the proletarianisation of working class women would spell the end of the nuclear family as the central economic unit.\textsuperscript{121} Working class women’s greater access to independent incomes has increased their power in the domestic realm. There is subsequently less financial pressure to marry and have children. As Belinda remarked, greater economic independence means ‘these days women don’t put up with as much as they used to.’ The growing number of apprehended violence orders in Campbelltown is perhaps an indication of men’s inability to maintain oppressive relationships with women.\textsuperscript{122}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{120} Hickman and Gunn, 2000.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Engels (1972 [1884], 80) states: ‘… since large-scale industry has transferred the woman from the house to the labour market and the factory, and makes her, often enough, the breadwinner of the family, the last remnants of male domination in the proletarian home have lost all foundations – except, perhaps, for some of that brutality towards women which became firmly rooted with the establishment of monogamy.’ He goes on (1972 [1884], 82): ‘It will then become evident that the first premise for the emancipation of women is the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry; and that this again demands that the quality possessed by the individual family of being the economic unit of society be abolished.’
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Contemporary women may be more selective in their partners and experimental in living compatibility than in the past. Denise and Sonya remembered marrying the first men who proposed. Their desire of a fulfilling family after the disappointing experiences of family in their childhood determined their decision. Having watched her parent’s acrimonious divorce and relationship difficulties of friends, Megan was more skeptical of family life:

I imagine I would probably suffer post-natal depression [if I had kids] (laughs) … cause I know its scary… it would be a huge change in lifestyle in every way … but, … its what people do. You grow up … you get married, you have kids and you live happily ever after … then you get divorced and then the kids, weekends here and the other weekends there and (laughs) … I don’t want to just be walked over and you know, ‘you’re a woman get in the kitchen and do what you were told to do’ and equally I don’t want to be someone who is so defensive and so uncompromising that you’re just stubborn to anything and a bitch in a lot of ways …

A number of women were despondent at the differences between men and women they had observed. Robyn felt many men were ‘very selfish creatures’ and Belinda, after twenty-five years of marriage, professed: ‘…men and women are so totally opposite. They shouldn’t live together at all.’ These women did not wish to relinquish relationships and solidarity with working class men, but to live independently from them. It was the nuclear living arrangement and the social relations it educed that appeared most problematic. The reduction of financial and social pressures to marry heightens considerations of the emotional and intellectual quality of partnerships.\textsuperscript{123} As

Zaretsky has emphasised, the social expectation that two people can sustain one
another’s every need is unrealistic.\textsuperscript{124}

Although the nuclear family structure may not be agreeable to many women, the
importance of male and female kinship and networks remains vital to their material and
emotional well-being. While there is more scope today for them to live alone, this often
means a life of penury, particularly if children are involved. In Denise’s case she
endured seven years in a destructive relationship until she was confident of managing
alone financially with her children, so as not to face the danger and humiliation of
having to return.

I went to leave my husband, I’d been married about 7 or 8
years, the kids were quite small … and I was too scared to.
Where do I go, what do I do, and I don’t know, and there’s
all that stuff about class and that, I’d be a single mum and I’d
be bad, and I’m already bad. Then I’ll end up in Claymore,
and I’ll end up, you know, a single mum, dole bludger … …
on the one hand it would have been good to get out earlier,
but on the other hand I don’t think I would have been strong
enough, and …. I may have gone back, with my tail between
my legs, and not left again, because I tried it once and it
didn’t work.

Fear of social isolation where extended networks are minimal compounds the difficulty
some women experience in gaining their autonomy. Denise gradually and persistently
transformed herself into a waged worker, waited until fewer children were dependent on
her and fostered new supportive networks. She created a new non-patriarchal family
structure before fleeing the old ruinous one. The reconfiguration of the nuclear working
class family does not simply rest on the proletarianisation of women; the emotional
content of family life and the existence of support networks are also relevant. A

\textsuperscript{124} Zaretsky, 1976.
protectorate or a prison, working class families are a buffer against wider social injustices and inequalities.

The family does not only or necessarily entail women’s oppression; it can be an arena of social defence, particularly for subjugated social groups.\textsuperscript{125} Notwithstanding domestic conflicts, indigenous women, for example, argue their extended families have been a defensive mechanism against cultural genocide and colonisation.\textsuperscript{126} Langston suggests:

> If you’re working class, you don’t have such clearly demarcated concepts of yourself as an individual, but instead see yourself as part of a family and community that forms your survival structure. It is not easy to be faced with the risk of giving up ties, which are so central to your identity and survival.\textsuperscript{127}

Donaldson found the family-household was the main ‘source of happiness and meaning’ in the lives of male and female blue-collar workers.\textsuperscript{128} A Melbourne study found 71\% of blue collar workers rated family ‘as their greatest source of satisfaction in life’ compared with work (5\%), religion (4\%) and possessions (1\%).\textsuperscript{129} Donaldson suggests ‘The emphasis in the working class may be more on protecting the less well resourced members of the family-household than on maximising individual advantage. Co-operation and shared scarcity may have greater significance than individual “success” in the market.’\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{126} Curthoys, 1988; Langston 1998.
\textsuperscript{127} Langston, 1998, 132.
\textsuperscript{128} Donaldson, 1991, 65.
\textsuperscript{129} Donaldson, 1991, 65.
\textsuperscript{130} Donaldson, 1991, 64.
As argued above, women predominantly perform the labour of kinship management. It is they who do the ground work of forging reliable family relations through the everyday tasks and rituals of marking and celebrating family events, collecting and conveying family history and kinship connections.\textsuperscript{131} Though the expectation of marriage and children does not weigh so heavily on younger women, their desire for family and community, that is, for belonging and meaning, has not diminished.

Working class women’s quest for personal and social meaning is at once an individual and collective journey.\textsuperscript{132} They strive to be free with family, rather than from family. Family therefore facilitates and limits working class women’s bid for self and social emancipation. Their pursuit of post-school education, not just for workplace qualifications, but also to discover the social world and their position in it, illustrates the interconnection. As Denise noted, she and a girlfriend ‘always knew that there was something else … we didn’t know where we were going but we knew that Bingo and scones wasn’t the answer.’ Their pursuit of learning was a further way of resisting the dominant ideology and seeking ways to reclaim greater control over their lives.

Many had to battle the failure, boredom and fear they experienced as schoolchildren in their bid for deeper self-knowledge and social understanding. Belinda’s recollections of school were fairly typical:


\textsuperscript{132} Rowbotham, 1995, 74.
I changed schools seven times plus with me mum and dad’s divorce and what not going on at the time I didn’t do well at school and because... once I started to not be able to concentrate on my school work it started to go down and I suppose teaching was much the same as today, they don’t take much time with the kids that need the help, so the more I went down the worse I got, so most of the time I wagged school because, you know, I didn’t like it, especially if there was an exam on (laughs).

Deidre’s experience of sexual intimidation and witnessing of sexual abuse at an all-girls high school led to her premature departure. She fled in terror: ‘... my legs didn’t touch the ground ...I just got out of there and I went home to my father and I said ‘... I don’t care what you do, I will not walk inside that school again.’ Denise resented the gendered streaming of students into set subjects. From the time people disapproved of her working as a paper ‘boy’, sexual stereotyping of what people could accomplish and what they were worth, angered and baffled her.

Some women explained their education was seen as a low family priority because they were girls. This prejudice sometimes extended into adulthood. Heather recalled her brother being given much more support to complete high school than her. Gina was forced to leave school early to get a job and help with the family finances. It was only after she was married with two young children that the opportunity presented itself for her to gain further education. Against the wishes of her husband, she put herself and her children through immense hardship to get a computing diploma at night school. Just as she was about to graduate her husband decided to migrate to Australia. It would take her another fifteen years before she would re-enter education. She was compelled by hopes of personal independence and a decent life for her children.
Gina found Australian society did not deliver her from the crimes of social inequality. Many years after their arrival in Australia, Gina was forced to leave work due to a chronic over-use injury. She experienced great frustration with the bureaucratic insensitivities of the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service who retrained her for various occupations that she was unable to physically perform because of her disability. It was never suggested to her that she was capable of anything other than traditional jobs for working class women, that is, cleaning, retail or office work. Langston contends:

…the classist stereotyping of the working class as being dumb and inarticulate tracks most into vocational and low skilled jobs. A few of us are allowed to slip through to reinforce the idea that equal opportunity exists.\(^\text{133}\)

Gina defied these class prejudices and eventually found her own way into a social welfare course at TAFE. While it was very rewarding on a personal level, her studies did not lead to paid employment. The increasing proportion of local welfare services carried out by non-profit, charitable and religiously affiliated agencies hampered this goal. Gina became caught up in the voluntary labour force that sustains these industries. She works one day a week for a local agency in the hope that her volunteer work will increase her skills and the prospects of a paid job in the future. Gina believed working class women were being manipulated and that the ruse of voluntarism essentially perpetuated and exploited the reserves of local unemployed people. Though Gina fought for many years to gain an education and qualifications, she could not overcome the capitalist imperative for an unemployed surplus army.

It is a testament to their resilience that these women’s desires for knowledge and liberation have not been crushed by the inequalities of the formal education system,

\(^\text{133}\) Langston, 1998, 131.
which has served them so poorly in the past, and the broader structural constraints they face. Robyn remembers feelings of intimidation, insecurity and displacement as a child in the public housing neighbourhoods of Airds. Influenced by her early exposure to the attitudes and struggles of rank and file unionists within her family, Robyn aspired to a job where she could help create a society that did not compel people to live in such alien environments. From a young age she planned to study journalism at university to expose social injustices. She never anticipated the effects class background would have on her experience of it:

… it just was so hard to grasp the concepts … I had a very short concentration span … found it difficult to write an essay, to research anything … I didn’t know how to use a computer … it really scared me. …people my own age … seemed to have been in contact with the types of books that I’d never been in contact with before, like the classics … that was never really part of my life growing up … it was a whole new culture. … my parents could only afford something between ten and twenty dollars a week and I was having difficulty with the train fare let alone textbooks… The woman that I was living with taught me how to shop with that money. You buy a lot of mince … a lot of vegies and you make stews … before she taught me how to do that - Weetbix, water, milk, coffee … I’d drink a lot of coffee to stem the hunger…

In a region filled with young job seekers, Robyn found it difficult to obtain part-time work to alleviate her situation, and so the material and emotional support of family and friends were vital in her struggles to overcome the many economic and cultural barriers she encountered while trying to complete her degree. Nonetheless she discovered new ideas and ways of seeing the world and the position of herself and family within it that enabled her to articulate her instinctive contempt for injustice. She became involved in student politics, which enabled her to greatly expand her political knowledge, develop many practical skills and experience the vitality of solidarity.
It is not only the education system that perpetuates a ‘hidden curriculum’; working class women pursue a concealed agenda of working the system to their maximum gain and minimum loss.\textsuperscript{134} Aware of its shortcomings, they focus on what personal, family and community advantages can be extracted. While material gain is certainly a consideration, broader emancipatory goals are also significant. The attempt to gain greater workplace autonomy through educational qualifications, for example, is motivated by a desire for more non-work time, or at least less stressful work time. In other words, they seek to capture more time and energy for home and community involvement. Their universal choice of welfare, health and educational post-school qualifications reflects gendered educational patterns but, more importantly, a desire for socially meaningful livelihoods rather than more personally lucrative careers. Moreover, their daily and generational transmission of hardships, values, and a knowledge store that contradicts and undermines the dominant ideology, is an inherent threat to the capitalist order.\textsuperscript{135}

In the absence of accessible organised defence of their interests, these working class women forged their own political sense of the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of the social world around them. Many talked of the revelations of social science and community education courses, for example. Others experiences of political parties forced their views leftwards. Some have stared down the abyss of homelessness and

\textsuperscript{135} Tebbutt, 1995.
suicide. All have undertaken their own odyssey into the political and social unknown and have been radicalised to some extent from the experience.

The family is a contradictory social institution in which working class women are anything but passive victims. Contrary to conventional views, Langston argues many women exert considerable influence over the social and political views of their husbands. She explains:

The class system weakens all women. It censors and eliminates images of female strength. The idea of women as passive, weak creatures totally discounts the strength, self-dependence and inter-dependence necessary to survive as working-class women and poor women. My mother and her friends always had a less-than-passive, less-than-enamoured attitude toward their spouses, male bosses, and men in general. I know from listening to their conversations, jokes and what they passed on to us, their daughters, as folklore. When I was five years old, my mother told me about how Aunt Betty had hit Uncle Ernie over the head with a skillet and knocked him out because he was raising his hand to hit her, and how he’s never even thought about doing it since. This story was told to me with a good amount of glee and laughter. All the men in the neighborhood were told of the event as an example of what was a very acceptable response in the women’s community for that type of male behavior. We kids in the neighborhood grew up with these stories of women giving husbands, bosses, the welfare system, schools, unions and men in general hell, whenever they deserved it. For me there were many role models of women taking action, control and resisting what was supposed to be their lot.

The respondents in this study directed much of the family’s political socialisation and actions. In Sonya’s first marriage a fairly conventional sexual division of labour prevailed. However, Sonya was the most influential in the electoral stakes:

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137 Langston, 1998, 133.
... my ex-husband, for instance, voted Liberal because his mother voted Liberal in the first couple of elections that he voted ... as soon as I met him I quietly and gently explained the right way to vote and the wrong way to vote ... and so he voted more left leaning for our entire marriage ...

Belinda’s family had always supported the Labor Party and the unions, however in recent state and federal elections she became a more active campaigner for the local left-wing candidate. She had also taken family members (her children and brother) on an ‘outing’ to a rally concerning free education, and supports two of her daughters in their political activism. It was her extended family that came to the financial rescue when she or her husband was involved in industrial action. The long history of working class women’s denigration and disempowerment reflect the efforts of capital and the state to suppress their alternative and elusive politics; they, their families and communities are a cradle of social insurrection borne from the inequality and oppression they endure under capitalism.138

Working class women hold diverse values, but they share similar life experiences and chances because of the commonalities of their social position. They all struggle to make ends meet, none live fully independent lives, and their options and choices in life are limited. They are socialised to care, but there is a politics to this. Perhaps more than other social groupings, working class women know the perils of isolation and the vulnerability of the individual. They seek out, build and maintain the alliances that support people in need. Their first priorities are to their kin and those less fortunate. The patterning of these shared fortunes has generated a hybridised value system that reflects

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a partial internalisation of the capitalist ideology and the defence of an alternative non-
capitalist ideology. They carry forth the essence of a counter-hegemonic vision that
values independence, sufficiency and solidarity above individualism, materialism and
competition.

In personally and collectively reclaiming social resources, knowledge and ideological
terrain, working class women resist the forces seeking to prosper from their oppression.
For these working class women rebellion is an everyday necessity for survival. Katz
observed in his study of the American poor that little was known about how the
impoverished survived on a daily basis. He hypothesised:

> The key to their survival ... has been a series of complex, intersecting networks. Some of these have centered on family. Kin have helped each other through crises. Others have linked neighbors in intricate chains of reciprocity, spontaneous and extraordinary acts of generosity between poor people themselves. Still others have been more institutional: local labour markets that awarded jobs on the basis of friendship and patronage, and of critical importance, local sources of credit ...

The preceding examination provides considerable support for these assumptions.
Working class women do not distinguish between the formal economy, the community
and the domestic arena for political and economic purposes. Each is a domain of
resources, which they have varying degrees of control over, and varying strategies for
extracting greatest benefit from, while minimising the costs.

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139 Katz, 1989, 190.
Few working class women have the means for organising collective political resistance on their own terms. Scott observed ‘the goal of the great bulk … of resistance is not directly to overthrow or transform a system of domination but rather to survive – today, this week, this season – within it.’ Where the possibilities to openly challenge oppressive conditions are not forthcoming or too risky working class women wait, recuperate and survive to fight another day. It is a makeshift and pragmatic politics that deploys limited resources for maximum effect as opportunities arise. For the most part their politics is unorganised, not for a want of motivation or ability, but for want of resources and genuine solidarity from others outside and within their world.

Working class women use an array of survival and resistance strategies to circumvent the structural constraints of capitalism. Notions of sustainability, equality and solidarity underscore their interventions; tenets that disrupt and destabilise the accumulation of capital and consequently elicit ever-greater social control of working class women’s lives. As they continuously find ‘legitimate’ paths of redress and improvement closed to them, submerged and spontaneous political actions target their oppressions at a practical and ideological level. Their political strategies are the rational responses of a relatively fractured and weakened social group facing a strong and insidious opponent. Their small community based social units and networks are ever poised to expand their political repertoire and collective endeavours, as they must, because their resistance to capital is grounded in the politics of survival and hope.

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140 Walby, 1999.
6 Conclusion

This thesis argues working class women make a vital, if thwarted, contribution to the creation of a more equitable, just and sustainable society.\(^1\) Capitalism is premised on the continual exploitation and immiseration of the working class; it is dependent on its systemic nemesis for expansion.\(^2\) Marx and Engels argued:

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\ldots \text{it becomes evident, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society ... because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him ... by \{labour’s\} revolutionary combination, due to association, ... What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers.}\]

Capital is intent on labour’s demise by rendering working people increasingly unnecessary to production, monopolising all resources and property (human and

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3 Marx and Engels, 1947 [1848], 29-30.
ecological), and suppressing all opposition. Labour’s refusal to surrender the means of survival (material, emotional, spiritual) is the most fundamental form of resistance.

Working class women’s politics necessarily centres round withstanding and by extension subverting capital’s advance. As capital must expand to structurally replenish itself, activities that impede its ability to do so, in the long term, jeopardise its viability. Much of working class women’s everyday self-activities are obstacles to capital accumulation. Their actions rest on the creation of working class combinations and associations, which conduct the seizure, defence, and distribution of material, emotional and ideological resources.

From these resources, collectivities and experiences working class women forge a counter-hegemonic culture and prefigure broader political formations in the battle against capital and the state. At times they are in the forefront and the backbone of overt political actions. At other times they keep the wheels of dissent and resistance turning covertly, all the while fomenting conditions for wider campaigns. Cohen suggested:

…the intervention of women is similar to that of men during periods of ferment (public and collective action, militancy), the accent during chilling-out periods is on reproduction, the permanent, invisible effects of social influence. But the quiet revolution of slow-moving and deep-rooted everyday phenomena shapes the political process.

Working class women wage this politics of everyday life wherever capital’s forces intrude. The ‘cancer’, as Burgmann has explained it, is being fought in all the arenas of

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the broader political economy.\textsuperscript{6} The resistance strategies of survive, combine, shield, oppose, commandeer and recreate are played out in the formal political economy, the community and the household on a material, emotional and spiritual level.

More often working class women are beaten than triumphant; overall they are barely holding ground. Marx and Engels contended ‘Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruits of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of workers.’\textsuperscript{7} In the present context, working class women only find tenuous union amongst themselves and their small communities.

**Formal Political Economy**

Previous generations of working class women hoped myths about their politics might be rectified over time.\textsuperscript{8} This study argues orthodox conceptions of ‘politics’ and political organisation are limited, not working class women. Labour organisations and parties have usually failed to comprehend or accommodate their political culture across the domains of the formal political economy, the community and the household. Abstract theories have been unable to explain the variations in their political behaviour in different contexts. Historical materialist analyses frame working class women’s politics within their common struggle for survival and control over their environment. Different


\textsuperscript{7} Marx and Engels, 1947 [1848], 25.

settings have created different limitations, opportunities and outcomes in the pursuit of their interests.

In the contemporary Australian context, working class women battle within the terrain of capitalist democracy for personal and social emancipation. Parliamentarism does not deliver political or economic equality to working class women. The major parties side with capital against their interests, dissuading them from participation in the parliamentary process and diffusing their dissent. The structurally and geographically centralised system of parliamentarism is a further discouragement to their active involvement. Moreover, such engagements necessitate cooption, and the devaluation and jettisoning of working class culture and values, like social equality and sustainable economy. No forces that structurally threaten the accumulation of capital are permitted any significant influence within the parliamentary system. Chomsky and Herman contended parliamentary democracy is a ‘necessary illusion’ in a capitalist-dominated society to keep the exploited working majority from rebelling against the controlling bourgeois minority.

None of the women in the present study held allusions about parliamentarism. On the contrary, disillusionment and bitterness pervaded their thoughts and experiences of

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11 Chomsky and Herman, 1994.
formal politics. Any notion that parliamentarism assisted them had been buried. Politicians of all hues and apparatchiks alike were viewed with suspicion. This was partly due to their (perceived or real) collaboration with the enemies of labour, their apparent silent complicity in advancing the interests of capital, and their failure (individual or structural) to expose the bankruptcy of bourgeois parliamentarism. Working class women discern the allegiances of politicians and bureaucrats through their actions, not their words. Officials, who retain social privileges as they lament working class hardships, convince no one. The respondents believed their concerns were of no interest to the major parties, which were seen as presiding over the deterioration of social and living conditions. Capitalist ideology may temporarily mislead, confuse and deflect working class women, but it cannot explain the material and emotional realities they experience. It is this knowledge and the resistance it informs, that makes working class women’s politics dangerous to the capitalist order. The political system paraded before them was seen as a pale shadow on their own notions of what genuine democracy should entail. Working class democracy is an entirely different political creature, which the bourgeoisie must continually refuse and deny.

Working class women’s disenchantment with parliamentarism registers in their electoral volatility. While they are more likely to vote Labor, there is evidence they are over-

13 Aarons, 1999, 120.
represented amongst informal and swinging voters.\textsuperscript{16} In the present study, these trends reflected the women’s frustrated and vain searching within the parliamentary vacuum for an organisation that genuinely champions their interests.\textsuperscript{17} They argued against conservative political agendas that promote the market and profits above human and environmental needs. They believed big business and political parties to be on the same side, and against labour. Most women supported the ALP, not for the party it now is, but for what they expected and wanted it to be – a champion of labour against capital’s incursions. As no party was perceived as advancing their interests many resented the whole electoral process.

The advances of feminist politicians and bureaucrats have been disappointing in relation to the interests of working class women.\textsuperscript{18} Their legislative and policy reforms have failed to stem widening disparities in the distribution of wealth, especially amongst women. Indeed, in the current conservative climate progressive reforms are almost impossible to achieve and past gains difficult to retain.\textsuperscript{19} Feminism alone has been unable to force changes in the capitalist structure. Similarly, working class women have been reticent to join social movements that offer no critique or alternative to the political economic constraints that enfold them.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Chaples, 1993, 331; Leithner, 1997.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Burgmann, 2003.
\end{itemize}
Too often reform is a ruse for the extension of social control. For all the rhetoric of community engagement and participation, policy is rarely the creation of working class women, or created as they had intended by their mobilisations.\textsuperscript{21} The women in this study looked on such developments with a wary expedience, ready to commandeer resources intended to shackle them. The refusal of formal political power to working class women reflects the logical working out of the structural imperatives of capital accumulation, that is, to suppress forces that might destroy it by limiting its expansion on social or ecological grounds.\textsuperscript{22}

Meszaros’ contention that capital requires an extra-parliamentary counteraction was nothing new to these women.\textsuperscript{23} The political will to put labour in control of social resources will never emerge from capital’s ranks. Knowing this, the women in the present study waged their own campaign for liberation beginning from their immediate local and familiar surroundings, learning political lessons from their wins and losses along the way.

Centralised labour organisations have never allowed working class women the resources, support or time to steer their own political course or pace. The refusal of such organisations to relinquish power to grass-roots initiatives has made working class women wary of further exploitation and condescension from on high. They have


criticised working class women for their passivity and apathy and then been unexpectedly overwhelmed by their militancy or thrown off balance by the unorthodoxy of their chosen sites or forms of struggle. They fail to understand the material and emotional logic behind working class women’s spontaneous, small-scale, self-directed actions. They refuse to accept that uniting with working class women is not possible without relinquishing privileges, and sharing power and hardships with them. They have tended to pity or manipulate, rather than unite with them on their own terms. All the while, working class women’s resources for waging even local skirmishes are diminishing. How could working class women take such organisations seriously as vehicles for personal and social freedom?

Similarly, socialists that have failed to build a groundswell of support, particularly among working class women, have found no place in parliament. Attempting to do so may further diminish their standing in the eyes of women who are only familiar with capitalist scare mongering of all alternatives. That socialism is something to be created anew by labour, rather than copied from the derailed experiments of others, is rarely expounded.24

Some of the respondents were overwhelmed by the treachery of the existing political order to the point socialist tenets of an equitable, sustainable, collectively autonomous and just society impossible to contemplate – the stuff of dreams. Yet, these were not abstract and removed ideals in working class women’s lives. In a myriad of ways and contexts, these notions were used to express the kind of world they and theirs hoped

24 Lenin, 1965 [1920], 66-68.
Each day they were forced to bridge the gulf between the real and an ideal world, and it inevitably entailed compromises, inconsistencies and paradoxes within social relations and their own psyches. Overcoming this fracturing and reclaiming self and social control was only possible by clinging firmly to an often semi-articulated politics of hope. The struggle to realise these dreams was a subliminal element of everyday life.

The chasm between life under capitalism and the social world working class women envisaged was nowhere wider than in paid employment. The expanding proletarianisation of women has allowed some financial independence, which in turn has contributed to the decline of the nuclear family, but working class women today are no closer to emancipation than their foremothers. Working class women have always been employed formally or informally; their proletarianisation, poverty and ‘flexibility’ are not new. They have laboured within factories, farms, hospitals, and middle and upper class homes for generations. They are drawn into the labour force on the worst of

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terms; structurally blackmailed into the most dispensable and emotionally degrading jobs by the threat of family and community ruin.29

Working class women have always disproportionately borne the burdens of capital growth.30 The pulling of more working class women into the formal economy has accentuated capital’s contradictions and limitations. A submerged segment of labour has come into the open, where it had once been more inconspicuously cast in and out of the reserve army of labour.31 Today capital cannot readily conceal its incapacity and unwillingness to efficiently and humanely utilise the full potential of labour, notwithstanding the abundance of socially useful and meaningful work to be done; a structural weakness masked by the welfare state for a time.32

These processes are observable in Campbelltown. The local economy is incapable of absorbing the bulk of the local workforce and despite large-scale daily exports of labour the local unemployed reserves remain higher than the state average. Though female employment has increased at a slightly higher rate than men’s, jobs growth in Campbelltown has been entirely composed of part-time work and has been inadequate to meet the growing labour supply. Two thirds of women in Campbelltown are surplus to the requirements of the capitalist mode of production. Conventional sexual and cultural


demarcations persist despite decades of policy reform. Lengthier periods of formal education have not facilitated class mobility, social equality, rewarding careers or autonomous working conditions for working class women. The state subsidises and obscures this systemic liability by providing paltry incomes to as many women again as private capital retains.

Despite these failings the local bourgeoisie are no less enthralled with the pursuit of capital accumulation. Substantial public investment has been thrown at private corporations commanding large tracts of land and providing few jobs. The influence of private capital far outweighs that of labour in the distribution of Campbelltown’s productive resources. The needs, desires and capacities of working class women do not figure in the City’s economic planning. The possibility of alternative political economic models that might advance their well-being is not countenanced.

Capital and labour in Campbelltown are fragmented and dispersed making politics at the point of production a complex undertaking. Men in all income categories fare better than women, though the differences between them are lowest among the working class and highest amongst the wealthiest.\(^{33}\) Disproportionate attention has been paid to workplace sexual disparities within the working class while other salient elements of their industrial politics are ignored. Attention has been deflected from capital’s part in the immiseration of working class women and men who struggle to bring in a family wage between them. Moreover, most feminists have avoided the question of the class differences between

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\(^{33}\) Aarons, 1999, 130.
women to the extent that female incomes are diverging quickest.\textsuperscript{34} Notwithstanding the structural advantages men generally enjoy, the privileged position of upper class women over lower class women and men is usually dismissed as anti-feminist or ignored.\textsuperscript{35} Neither non-socialist feminism nor orthodox unionism is structurally prone to overcome sexual divisions within the working class, without which the solidarity needed to overcome the rule of capital is unlikely to emerge.

The militancy required to reverse the exploitation of labour does not come within the mantle of conventional, defensive trade unionism.\textsuperscript{36} As the section of the labour force most exploited under capitalism, the union movement has shown the least and most belated interest in working class women’s industrial battles. Similar to the ALP, the trade union hierarchy often sees itself as a partner of capital in the pursuit of economic growth, not its class opponent.\textsuperscript{37} To support working class women’s struggles is to oppose capital accumulation, which they are structurally disinclined to do. Given this reticence at a time of growing female employment, the hemorrhaging of trade union membership should not be surprising. The proletarianisation of women makes avoidance of the structural conflicts between capital and labour all the more untenable, if the movement is to survive.

Unlike the union movement, capitalist ideologies of work and the market held little sway over the working class women in this study. While some gained fulfillment from

\textsuperscript{34} Gunn, M. 2000b. "Women on Top, Men on Slide." \textit{The Australian}, 21st June, 21 June, 14.
camaraderie on the job, there was little intrinsic value in the work most performed. Low and insecure wages, authoritarian management, inefficient operations, debased social relations on the job, and tedium were common grievances.38 Where possible, most directed their efforts at re-humanising the workplace, building defensive support systems and challenging the authority and ineptitude of the bosses. Few found support from trade unions in their endeavours.

The respondents did not see the workplace as a distinct and separate arena of labour and struggle. Ideas, resources and actions from other aspects of their lives informed their understanding of how the workplace should operate and they took whatever steps they could to implement them. Resources from the paid workplace were looked upon not only in terms of how they facilitated the job at hand, but what ends they might be put to in advancing the well-being of home and community. Notions of property, workplace discipline, management prerogatives and company profits were peripheral to their overriding concerns for the rights and conditions of labour broadly speaking.

Working class women have drawn their purpose and strength from their communities and households.39 These cross-sectoral alliances have acted as catalysts for confrontations over industrial and social issues, notwithstanding the enmity of capital, the state or the union movement at times. There is some recent evidence that unions

supporting such campaigns have been rewarded with increasing memberships where others have continued to fall away.⁴⁰

The conservative assault on the union movement today and its weakened structural position is driving a re-visititation of alternative forms of organising in some, but far from all, industries. Some unions have attempted to route capital’s strategy of pitting workers and consumers against each other.⁴¹ While this has met with limited success, recent efforts do not challenge the process of capital accumulation or control of resources. Moreover, these tactics have not been grounded in any concrete mass support base beyond the purchasing behaviour of shoppers, which can leave workers vulnerable to attack from the bosses. Recent threats to railway workers over fare-free days were an example.⁴² Paper and electronic coalitions are of little long-term value unless they stand for physical solidarities and networks that can be counted on when the full weight of the capitalist state is inevitably brought to bear on those who seek structural change.

In worker-consumer alliances of old, class solidarities and working class women’s community networks were crucial to their success.⁴³ Too often union bureaucracies have

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⁴⁰ Cooper, 2003, 206-207.
seen themselves as leaders and discipliners of labour, rather than their comrades. Working class women and men are the bedrock and knowledge well-spring of the movement. The importance of solidarity and union support has been reinforced through kinship and neighbourhood networks. Over time this connection has become devalued and neglected.44

Working class women are distinctly positioned to forge links between the formal workplace, community and home. They, more than men, have traversed the interstices between these arenas and are adept in the transference of resources across them. Working class women’s struggles have been most ferocious and sustained in circumstances where home, community and work intertwined.45 As capital’s penchant for ‘flexible’ female labour continues working class women bring their knowledge, values and strategies of resistance into the workforce.46

Without broader support the workplace resistances of women in this study never overcome the alienation and exploitation of their labour. All sought to minimise the negative impacts of paid work on their home and community life. Some worked underground or tried self-employment, but none of these tactics produced the required balance between work and non-work time or delivered them from the control of capital

46 Burgmann, 2003, 333.
or the state. The capitalist mode of production cannot structurally tolerate the widespread presence of non-exploitative, non-alienating workplaces – only by suppressing alternative political economies can labour be corralled into wage slavery. Working class women have put considerable effort into creating such alternatives beyond the formal political economy.

As more labour is rendered dispensable by capital, the state’s task of suppressing the social consequences intensifies. The security state expands while the welfare state contracts. Social relations and settings are militarised as capital’s ideological legitimacy wanes. Labour surplus to requirements is forced into criminalised underground political economies. Greater efforts are made to contain working class women - physically, materially and emotionally, as they are the most critical of, and skilled in evading, capital’s controls. These are signs of capital nearing its structural limits and the state resorting to harsher means to stabilise its contradictions. Working class women defend themselves from social terrain least penetrable to these processes, that is, arenas beyond the formal political economy.

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Community Political Economy

Working class women attempt to minimise their reliance on the formal political economy because of the hefty price it extracts in exchange for the limited sustenance it provides. Nonetheless, capital influences social relations and resource systems outside its immediate control; most obviously by denying working class women sufficient means to sustain themselves and their communities.

Control over territory (geographical and social) is a central element of working class women’s politics. Like industrial solidarity, alliances within working class communities are built over time from shared experiences of hardship and struggle. For many of the women in this study, making and keeping a home and community was a precarious experience. In private and public housing, length of tenure logically influences women’s sense of place and neighbourhood. The poorest women were most subjected to housing insecurity and hence least likely to benefit from neighbourhood networks, though they needed them the most.

The fear and insecurity of community expressed by women in this and other local studies reflects their heightened vulnerability in territories they have limited control

over. Labour has always been moved on and uprooted at the behest of capital. Labour has always been ‘flexible’ at work and beyond it. Constant dislocation and displacement unsettles class formation and fosters division within and across the classes. In Campbelltown public housing tenants (mainly women and children) have withstood the worst of it. Not only are tenants marched about (many forcibly) to the state’s tune, but they are also vilified for the poverty the capitalist state bestows upon them, in order to ward off potential support from within labour’s camp. It is they who are first paying the price for capital’s profligate organisation of industrial and residential land in Campbelltown and across the Sydney basin.

At the same time, the notion of socialised housing as a tenable alternative to life-long mortgages is erased from the public agenda and consciousness. The Campbelltown public housing estates seemed to be set up to fail as a progressive social experiment and perhaps this was never the state’s chief intention. Even if a degree of naivety was granted to state officials in expecting urban and residential planning to extinguish or at least conceal poverty, the shortcomings of the Radburn design were known before construction began. So too, were the advantages it offered for policing those extraneous to capital’s needs.

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Recent improvement programs have been aimed at dressing up the detached public housing stock for the private market, not empowering communities. While the Radburn townhouses are not so amenable to private sale, the land they sit upon has become prized space amidst Campbelltown’s increasingly congested city limits. Townhouse tenants are gradually being evicted and with that their collective voice is vanishing, as muted and fragmented as it may have been.

Meanwhile those who benefit from their deportation and oppression hide themselves away.\textsuperscript{56} Notwithstanding Campbelltown’s promoters, a class divide exists in the built and social environment.\textsuperscript{57} Aspirant and affluent locals are putting considerable effort into cordonning themselves off from the working class.\textsuperscript{58} More social and physical spaces are designated for the middle and upper class only. As in other western cities, an expanding class segregation signals their belief and fear that the state cannot shield them from the consequences of deepening social inequality.\textsuperscript{59}

Privatisation and commodification of social resources are more politically palatable methods of segregation than the unabashed classism of old. Gentrification, housing ‘renewal’, user-pays services and inflation are more subtle means of usurping working class territory. As a result working class women exert considerable energy in the battle

for diminishing public infrastructure. Their community labours often do not entail routine interactions with the public service for rightful entitlements and assistance. Typically they face obfuscation, reprisals, condemnation and heightened surveillance.\textsuperscript{60} Their experiences of social ills and class subjugation are cast as personal defects; essentially distracting attention from capital’s refusal to attend to labour’s interests and well-being.\textsuperscript{61}

Working class women’s community organisation skills are fundamental to the forging of class alliances and culture that facilitate their struggles against the aforementioned territorial onslaughts.\textsuperscript{62} The sharing of everyday inconveniences, impositions, belittlements, expenses, misdemeanours, indiscretions, remembrances, skills, talents and accomplishments with friends and relations is the social glue through which alienation is overcome and solidarities formed.\textsuperscript{63} Their intersecting associations form a submerged layer of resistance that produces and conceals working class activists (overt and covert).


Mutual aid arrangements and tactics for the reclamation of social resources are the mainstays of their resistance strategies within their communities.\textsuperscript{64}

Their claims were meagre in the midst of abhorrent squander. Social networks schooled these women in the business of ‘making do’ with virtually nothing. When circumstances required and allowed it, they requisitioned social resources by stealth, evasion, feigned deference or interest, refusal, denial, concealment, forgery, fabrication, half-truths, siphoning, harrying, bargaining, looking out and taking in. They felt no need to justify or answer for their civil disobedience and direct actions. They were recovering and redistributing resources mismanaged and misappropriated by others.\textsuperscript{65}

They gave freely of their own stretched material and emotional resources. Women in this study often went to lengths to assist those whom they knew little of other than their need of support. Their actions were for the collective benefit of the disadvantaged and marginalised. Their informal social webs blanketed as much of capital’s discarded human surplus as possible, in varying states of disrepair or disrepute.

These women did not resort to such tactics quickly or lightly. Many had tried politics by the rules in overt resistances only to find their efforts usurped, coopted, curtailed and eventually spent. Others were sufficiently invigorated by small victories, to make more radical demands. Some were put off by such experiences, but many rebounded out of

\textsuperscript{64} Rowbotham, 1974; Campbell, 1984; Bell, D. 1988. \textit{Generations: Grandmothers, Mothers and Daughters}. McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Fitzroy and Ringwood, Vic; Stevens, 1989; Stevenson, 1999.

\textsuperscript{65} Campbell, 1984, 203.
sheer necessity, with a more militant outlook.\textsuperscript{66} Their actions clashed against the limits of the capitalist state’s tolerance and there, in the absence of wider support, they remain wrestling and subverting its intransigence.\textsuperscript{67}

The unrelenting demonisation and impoverishment of the working class, fuels destructive relationships within their communities. Working class women are most likely to bear the lashing out of their alienated and dispossessed class without any of the protections and escapes available to wealthier women. Indeed, the greater crime committed against them is the perpetuation of social inequalities by capital and the state.

Working class women in this and other local studies were not clamouring for material riches to resolve their hardships or provide meaning in their lives. They practiced and reproduced a different moral ethos. They valued sufficient rather than conspicuous consumption and were unpretentious rather than proud if they happened to be better off than the person down the road.\textsuperscript{68} They wanted privacy within working class communities, not protection from them. Working class women struggle to convey these values to younger generations who are more heavily saturated in the mysticism of commodities, yet less able to partake of its rituals.\textsuperscript{69} The social reproduction of working class values is a vital aspect of their community labour; it reinforces principles that have sustained generations of labour.

\textsuperscript{67} Marcuse, 1965.
\textsuperscript{68} Morton, 2002.
Many of these women had gradually unearthed the importance of collectivism and social
equality from beneath the weight of their personal suffering and privation.\textsuperscript{70} In seeking
to improve their own conditions of existence they discovered their interconnectedness
with others and gained the confidence to press for greater personal and social
autonomy.\textsuperscript{71} For some, learning they were not alone in their struggles filled an emotional
void they had been urged to believe only commodities could satisfy.\textsuperscript{72} Overcoming
social alienation provided some antidote to the dehumanising enticements of the
market.\textsuperscript{73}

Not all working class women were nourished by community support mechanisms and
resistances.\textsuperscript{74} Capital’s hand in atomising working class formations was not without
some success. Yet the radicalisation conveyed by many of the women indicates its
tenuous deceptions often do not withstand the actualities of material life. The emotional
battering working class women receive is perhaps more difficult to heal, particularly
without the solidarity of empathetic women and men.

The sense of emptiness caused by social disposability, financial exclusion, meaningless
jobs and denials of human value and creativity carves deep rifts in the soul and psyche
that no social worker, dole cheque, home entertainment system, or any amount of

\textsuperscript{70} Seabrook, 1993, 203.
\textsuperscript{72} Seabrook, 1993, 199-204; Bulbeck, 1998, 340-341.
\textsuperscript{73} Seabrook, 1990; Donaldson, 1991, 68; Seabrook, 1997.
\textsuperscript{74} Seabrook, J. 1973. The Unprivileged: A Hundred Years of Family Life and Tradition in a Working-
Class Street. Penguin, Harmondsworth; Blackwell, T. and Seabrook, J. 1993. The Revolt Against Change:
daytime soap operas can remedy.\textsuperscript{75} Though working class men struggle to withstand the emotional injuries of capitalism, it is working class women who record the highest incidences of emotional and mental illness.\textsuperscript{76} In some ways men are socialised in a more physically and spiritually brutalising gender culture that perhaps diminishes their endurance for the endless survival campaigns working class women wage. Yet it is their womenfolk who care for, bolster and cajole the men in their lives to stand firm and supportive in the face of the relentless adversities of working class life. Some men had stayed; others had fled and found themselves without male or female support.\textsuperscript{77} Too often, community and neighbouring work is unevenly shouldered by women at a time when they have fewer resources and less energy to do so.\textsuperscript{78} Seabrook argues the commodification of caring has undermined the ties of kith and kin.\textsuperscript{79} However, the women in this study were not insensitive to men’s suffering, but increasingly unable and unwilling to carry their load as well as their own and their children’s. Without reciprocity solidarity is unattainable.\textsuperscript{80}

Under capitalism longstanding social networks radiate out from the family and household and into the community. They are not in themselves conduits for social transformation; it is the degradations of class that infuse them with a political impetus.

\textsuperscript{78} Burgmann, 2003, 331.
\textsuperscript{79} Seabrook, 1993, 163.
For the most part, working class women mobilise these forces and coordinate community-based struggles. In the face of stiff opposition and contrary allies, they weld together small interconnecting bands of mostly female activists. Together they gather in the means of subsistence, defend their social and geographical territory, care for the suffering and persecuted, shore up morale and advance the position and interests of labour whenever and wherever possible. In a world not of their making or choosing, working class women have no alternative but to engage in these skirmishes – their survival depends upon it.

**Domestic Political Economy**

The anticipation, by some theorists, that proletarianisation would deliver women from a disproportionate share of domestic labour was misplaced.\(^{81}\) While they are likely to receive more household help from their male partners (than other classes), in Campbelltown they are also more likely to not have one, and not to be able to afford assistance.\(^{82}\) Inadequate public infrastructure, such as child care, the structure of the welfare state, and sexual divisions of labour at work contribute to the continual saddling of the majority of domestic labour (their own and others) on working class women.\(^{83}\)

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The re-commodification of domestic labour, for those who can afford to pay for it, has overshadowed earlier thinking on its socialisation.\textsuperscript{84} Perhaps this is because the latter, more elusive, objective will never be amendable to state policy under capitalism. Domestic labour in working class households is firmly entrenched as a privatised undertaking.\textsuperscript{85}

In this context and in light of shortages, household resource management must be meticulous to avoid ruination. Many men, not having learned these skills, are less disciplined in their dealings with money and supplies. With the decline of the male breadwinner, working class women need and expect men to develop these abilities. However, notions that men should partially withdraw from paid work to share in domestic labour forget the requirement of two full-time working class incomes for survival.\textsuperscript{86}

The rise of ‘working poor’ couples might appear to demand a more equitable distribution of domestic labour in such households.\textsuperscript{87} Yet a recent study concluded young working class men are reluctant to contribute even if their female partners are in


\textsuperscript{85} Zaretsky, 1976.


Nonetheless, young working class women, as with their foremothers, insist on a fair distribution of domestic work. The apparent increase in single isolated young working class men perhaps testifies to women’s determination in this matter, particularly given their inability to buy their way around gendered domestic conflict and the privatisation of family life.  

Working class women have always practiced a range of tactics to encourage their menfolk to be more cooperative and egalitarian. Where these failed women turn in on themselves or took solace in the company of women. Contrary to Engels slave-like analogy of working class women, in this and other studies male hegemony was difficult to achieve in proletarian households. Collis suggests:

…if we are interested in looking at the power strategies women use in their marital relationships, we need to go beyond their use of overt tactics in situations where there is a clear winner and loser. A focus on manifest power both underestimates the structural constraints within which women operate and privileges the kinds of strategies men use, while simultaneously obscuring women’s agency and their ability to creatively challenge patriarchy.

Like concepts of socialisation and other overly deterministic theories of women’s oppression, Engels gave insufficient credence to women’s creative intelligence in

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91 Collis, 1999, 72-73.
93 Collis, 1999, 62.
dealing with the material and emotional imperatives before them.\textsuperscript{94} The working class women in this and other studies are anything but victims of male dominance in the domestic realm, indeed they ‘ruled the roost’ is many instances.\textsuperscript{95}

The proletarianisation of working class women and welfare provisions have somewhat reduced the financial pressure on them to withstand unsatisfactory relationships, of which the growth in female headed households provides some substantiation.\textsuperscript{96} Class immiseration also plays a part in these trends. Young working class couples are delaying family formation because of economic constraints.\textsuperscript{97} Moreover, the structure of welfare payments disadvantages nuclear household configurations.\textsuperscript{98} The social forces that once underscored the ascendancy of the nuclear family are presently in decline.\textsuperscript{99}

Meanwhile the human need for communion and support intensifies. The reduced economic motivation to marry has placed greater emphasis on partner compatibility and the intrinsic difficulties of satisfying most human needs within the confines of the private nuclear household.\textsuperscript{100} Donaldson contends working class ‘fictive kinship’ networks extend beyond these confines, providing wider avenues for meaningful relationships, personal fulfillment and protection.\textsuperscript{101} Disintegration of nuclear

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{94} Bryson, 1988, 146-149.
  \item \textsuperscript{95} Campbell, 1984; Bell, 1988; Langston, 1998.
  \item \textsuperscript{96} Zaretsky, 1976; Bryson, 1988, 135-136; Chant, 1997; Gilding, 1997.
  \item \textsuperscript{98} Bryson, 1988, 135; McManus, 2004.
  \item \textsuperscript{99} Gilding, 1997.
  \item \textsuperscript{100} Gilding, 1997, 202.
  \item \textsuperscript{101} Donaldson, 1991, 65.
\end{itemize}
households risk rupturing complex support systems. Where working class families offer protection and defence, in the main, it is women’s emotional labour and their caring and kinship maintenance work that makes it so.

They pay too great a price in their battles against social alienation and de-humanisation. Though class privations cause them the greatest harm, they are more at risk of poverty, emotional stress, and violence in the home than working class men. They experience higher rates of illness and die younger than women of higher classes. The inter-generational effects of their poorer health status are more pronounced because larger numbers of children and kin rely upon them for survival. The promotion of middle class mothering leaves some women with a deep sense of inadequacy and failure. Their prudent and sustainable domestic economy skills and honest teachings on working class exigencies are maligned by consumer ideology and policed by the state.

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In the context of inadequate resources, the pressure of these responsibilities and the denial of personal needs is too readily medicated and pathologised, while too little is done about the social causes.\(^{109}\) The state’s erasure of class exploitation and conflict from political discourse inevitably denies working class women’s countervailing experiences and knowledge.\(^{110}\) The disparagements and deceptions of commodity traders, from whom working class women must extract their keep, continue unabated.\(^{111}\) Efforts to lure working class women to commodity fetishism have always been partial as a consequence of their material position.\(^{112}\) Nonetheless, notions of human and ecological worth and connectedness beyond market valuations have become more difficult to sustain. There are no potions for the theft of self-love, household and community disarray and loss of autonomy.\(^{113}\) The extent of political and ideological containment directed at working class women perhaps provides some indication of the threat their social reproduction labours pose to the established order.\(^{114}\)

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\(^{113}\) Matthews, 1984, 88; Tebbutt, 1995.
Working class women’s actions and power in the household flout conventional typecasting of them simply as bearers of oppression and pain. The women in this and other studies used all available opportunities to advance their personal and social liberation, transforming domestic relations and arrangements along the way. Struggles over domestic labour and gender ideology with partners and within themselves were an important everyday occurrence, but for most these were battles shared with female companions. Many saw their households as one element in an extended community support system that offered material, emotional and cultural reinforcement against the manipulations of men, the market and the state.

Their many debasements may have given working class women pause, but they have not dissuaded them from their voyages of self and social discovery. The daily encroachment of capital and the state in their lives compels them to learn more of their relationship with it, in order to survive it. More often than not, its hostility towards them is confirmed. At times though, new ways forward, new weaknesses, new strategies and new alternatives are mapped out from their explorations and engagements with capital - knowledge that renews working class households across the generations.

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Conclusion

In its bid to stave off movements for social equality and working class democracy that deny profits and accumulation, capital continually seeks to expand its control over working class life.\footnote{Marx, 1976; Chomsky, N. and Herman, E. S. 1994. \textit{Manufacturing Consent; The Political Economy of the Mass Media}. Vintage, London.} This study has argued working class women are crucial players in this epic struggle because of their power in working class communities. Working class women’s power and agency were not given significant theoretical consideration until the 1970s when debates about social reproduction, domestic labour, and the role of the housewife raged through to the mid 1980s, as discussed in Chapter Two. Attempts to marry Marxist and feminist ideas on these matters were eventually deemed unsatisfactory and the project of understanding working class women’s politics was largely discarded.\footnote{Sargent, 1981.} The harsh material realities of working class women’s lives did not cease, even if its theoretical investigation had.

Working class women are constrained in their everyday lives by a social world only partly of their making. In a world where social division and competition are part of the logic of capital, working class women attempt to merge the tasks of personal, family and social survival must often choose between personal or family survival. In reconciling conflicted and fragmented identities, the internalisation of capitalist ideology must also be recognised.\footnote{Seccombe, W. and Livingstone, D. W. 2000. \textit{Down to Earth People: Beyond Class Reductionism and Postmodernism}. Garamond Press, Aurora, Ontario, 25.} However, working class women’s daily lives provide regular points of contradiction with the dominant ideology, making it impossible for ideological control to ever be complete. Indeed the incompleteness of material and ideological control over
working class women is precisely what incites such invasive social control by the capitalist state and its vilification of working class women, as discussed in previous chapters.

Working class women, more than men, are simultaneously producers, consumers and carers – this nexus of activity has proved a wellspring of resilient and multi-pronged emancipatory actions. They are in a unique position to forge small-scale interconnecting alliances that counteract capital’s tendency to fragment human activity.\textsuperscript{120} They rejoin the spheres of production and reproduction through their survival and resistance strategies.

The link between the spheres of production and reproduction that working class women enact offers a way forward for a reinvigorated socialist feminist theory. Ferguson and other materialist feminists, who emerged from the ashes of dual systems theory with their emancipatory goals intact, have sought ways to overcome the economism and biological determinism of earlier theoretical efforts. The concept of patriarchy, for example, has always been more useful as a description of men’s general social position than an explanation for it, which inevitably slides into biological determinism. This study has indicated in different settings (such as domestic labour) that relationships between working class women and men are similar to and at odds with that between the genders in other social classes. Moreover, upper class women contribute to the structural exploitation of working class women and men. Without denying women’s suffering at

the hands of men (publicly and privately), male behaviour, like female behaviour, always varies according to social contexts.

Ferguson suggests that a major flaw in socialist feminist writings was the uncritical acceptance of ‘a defining historical feature of capitalism: the separation of production from consumption (or reproduction).’\textsuperscript{121} This conceptual myth enabled theoretical treatments of the capitalist mode of production to fetishise the marketplace as its sole and autonomous engine room. Feminist political economists have questioned this narrowly defined and abstract understanding of ‘the economy’ in recent years.\textsuperscript{122} Some of these writers echo earlier debates concerning the productive or unproductive character of mainly women’s social reproduction work. Waring, for instance, criticises the dominant economic practice of defining only labour involved in the exchange of commodities for profit as ‘productive’ and economically valued.\textsuperscript{123} She recalls Engels materialist formulation of the economy:

\begin{quote}
… the determining factor of history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This, again, is of a two-fold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence of articles of food and clothing, dwellings and of the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.\textsuperscript{124}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{121} Ferguson, 1999, 2.
\textsuperscript{123} Waring, 1996, 187.
\textsuperscript{124} Cited in Waring, 1996, 188.
Or in Armstrong and Armstrong’s words, ‘the ways people co-operate to provide for their daily and future needs, combined with the techniques and materials at their disposal, establish the framework within which all human activity takes place.’

The fetishisation of the marketplace and commodities has obscured a broader historical materialist understanding of the economy and the attendant social relations. Ferguson argues the oppression of women or any other social group cannot be fully grasped while ever the formal economy holds centre stage analytically. She does not deny the importance of the marketplace, but argues it has dominated theoretical explanations for too long. In fetishised views of the economy, labour is seen as one more commodity, one more factor of production under capitalism. Because of this preoccupation the interconnection of all human activity is lost and the implications of capitalism’s inability to produce people or labour power on its own are not fully recognised. Working class women’s labours are not simply functional prerequisites for capitalism; they operate with the opposing objective of meeting human need and as such they incubate a non-capitalist mode of production that cannot be extinguished, lest capital jeopardise its only source of labour power, (so far).

The alienation of labour from their humanity, or Marx’ words ‘species being’, works against class formation and confrontation. For this reason, Ferguson argues, struggles around social reproduction are as vital as struggles around production. Indeed, struggles

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125 Cited in Ferguson, 1999, 2.
126 Ferguson, 1999, 3-4.
127 Marx, 1976, 716.
at the point of production rely on the class alliances and networks forged outside the workplace, most often by working class women’s household and community organisation labours. Overcoming alienation from humanity and class is a precondition of overcoming alienation from production and the products of labour.\textsuperscript{129} It is vital the material and non-material aspects of working class women’s social reproduction labour be factored into to such investigations.

Another important aspect of recent socialist feminist writings has been their resuscitation of the importance of historical materialism, which insists upon grounded and contextualised analysis. This framework explains social life as both shaping, and shaped by, the self-activity of individuals in combination. Rowbotham drew attention to how consciousness and material reality interact. She noted:

Marx … believed that we make our consciousness in the process of making ourselves and changing the world, within the limits of the particular historical circumstances in which we find ourselves.\textsuperscript{130}

In other words, the flame of working class women’s self-activity gives form to the social structure. A recurring theme of this study is the refusal of working class women to accept their ‘place’ or to totally succumb to oppression and hardship. In the vein of Jeremy Seabrook’s writings, these women live a politics of hope as a necessity of survival.\textsuperscript{131} This politics is driven by a belief that life can and should be better. The battle for autonomy and liberty is being waged everyday as working class women

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item\textsuperscript{129} Marx and Engels, 1947 [1848]; Marx, 1976, 275-7.
  \item\textsuperscript{131} Hogan, 1991; Hogan, 1992.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
attempt to reclaim and refashion the material world around them in solidarity with other oppressed groups.

Intrinsic to this practical struggle is a vision of a better world, what some would condescendingly refer to as utopianism. Oscar Wilde suggested:

> A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing.132

The utopian tradition encapsulates the social imagination of new and better worlds. Without a utopian politics, no social movement would know where it was going and no revolution would know what it was transforming into. Humanist socialists and anarchists believe that the libertarian impulse is ever-present and hence ever oppressed by those who benefit from the established order. Marshall contends, for example, that an anarchist society

... can be seen in all groups and associations which are organized like networks rather than pyramids, and which are voluntary, temporary and small. It emerges in groups which are based on affinity between members rather than the rigours of the rule-book; which are in flux rather than in aspic. It begins to take shape in self-help, mutual aid and direct action organizations, in co-operatives, learning networks, and community action. It emerges spontaneously when people organize themselves outside the State during emergencies, disasters, strikes, and revolutions.133

These grass-roots initiatives are occurring all the time and were certainly evident in the lives of the working class women interviewed for this study. The failure of the state and capital to provide for the material and emotional needs of all has preserved the role of self-activity and mutual aid as key elements in the political economy of working class

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133 Marshall, 1993, 663.
women. To that extent, the skills and potential for autonomy are always semi-active and semi-articulated in working class women lives.

Notwithstanding the oft-cited gains of the women’s movement, the capitalist pillars of economic inequality were barely dented. As Naiman has noted, capitalism can concede formal gender equality without jeopardising its own existence; it cannot concede class equality. Female and male members of the working class today continue to eke out their existence. Indeed, female poverty has increased. What went wrong with the women’s liberation movement?

The women’s liberation movement was a many-headed creature, too few parts of which were actively concerned with the class differences among women and the elimination of poverty. Kaplan contended:

Socialist feminists ... were conspicuous among the few who actively collaborated with working-class women and discussed strategies for action with them. In Melbourne, the Working Women’s Centre, founded in 1975, succeeded in bringing white- and blue-collar workers together. It was also responsible for one of the few successful attempts to bring Anglo-Celtic and immigrant women together in joint action, although there were intermittent trade union activities and strikes by migrant women which were supported by the rank and file.

In the cross-class composition of the women’s liberation movement, middle class women were certainly in the majority, in the most powerful positions, and the most likely to gain from its priorities. The pursuit of a liberal rights agenda or radical

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137 Kaplan, 1996, 69.
separatist agenda deterred many working class women. Without dismissing the efforts of second wave feminists, the movement’s successes were to some extent made possible by the historical circumstances in which they occurred. The emergence of the women’s liberation movement coincided with a rare period of economic buoyancy that allowed for greater political latitude in the demands made upon the state. The relative national prosperity also corresponded with a heightened consumerism that accelerated the atomization of conventional family and gender formations, to the advantage of capital. Victories for the movement became much harder to obtain from the late 1970s when the nation’s economic fortunes began to sour and its politics headed rightwards.

By the 1980s signs of a feminist backlash and reversals of some gains were becoming evident. It was during this decade that many feminists retreated from class as a salient aspect of women’s lived experiences, instead taking shelter in academic or postmodern feminism. Perhaps the stunted individualism of ‘third wave’ feminism is a logical legacy of the denial of collectivism by many of the founding mothers of the women’s liberation movement. There has been a tendency on the part of some to blame the succeeding generations of women for the decline of the movement, however it is perhaps more useful to consider the abandonment of the project by second-wave feminists.

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138 McCourt, 1977.
feminists themselves in the context of an increasingly hostile political economy and a
neo-liberal restoration, or their cooption by the capitalist state.142

The barriers that prevented working class women from greater participation in the
women’s liberation movement are with us yet. The pressing needs of material life, the
tyrranny of distance between mostly metropolitan organisational headquarters and the
suburbanised working classes, the costs of organisation in time and money, the absence
of a compelling alternative vision of society (apart from an oppositional standpoint) and
the absence of forms of organisation and activism that consciously include working class
women, continue to be major hurdles to their active involvement. But this is not to argue
that working class women are apolitical or passively political.

One of the crucial insights of the women’s liberation movement was its insistence on the
redefinition of politics: the personal is political. This question involves gender and class
in an ongoing dialectic. However, substantial sections of the movement were dismissive
of working class women’s politics, particularly their refusal to turn their backs on
family, community and men. Rather than seek to understand the politics of everyday life
from working class women’s perspectives, many feminists distanced themselves from
this complex social reality. Countless publications have argued the theoretical toss about
the connections or disconnections between class and gender; very few included the lived
experiences of working class women in their formulations.143 Working class women, in

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143 Rare exceptions include: McCourt, 1977; Sidel, R. 1995. Urban Survival: The World of Working-Class
the main, were implicitly seen to be suffering from a feminist version of false consciousness and when they realized this through feminist education and ‘experiences’ they would be able to transform their own lives and destroy patriarchal society in the process.\textsuperscript{144} It was not until Aboriginal women’s voices began to be heard in the mid 1980s that the racist and classist assumptions of such views were seriously challenged.\textsuperscript{145} Rowbotham observed:

\begin{quote}
Instead of examining the actual social composition of our movement and the forces and experiences which have radicalized certain groups of women, the feminism of the women’s liberation movement [was] presented as the consciousness of women in general. This makes it impossible to begin to work out the relationship of the movement to women not already involved.\textsuperscript{146}
\end{quote}

The women’s liberation movement was not in practice as inclusive or emancipatory as it claimed to be in theory; consequently neither patriarchy nor capitalism have been transformed.\textsuperscript{147} It is difficult to imagine how any social movement that seeks equality on one social dimension (gender) while ignoring it on others has much chance of success; this was exactly feminism’s critique of Marxism; yet it failed for the most part to implement this insight itself.

Only socialist feminism has been open to a comprehensive engagement with working class women, though some variants of this political school have been closed to considerations of race-ethnicity and non-centralist forms of socialism.\textsuperscript{148} Libertarian and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[145] Curthoys, 1988.
\item[146] Rowbotham 1979, 105.
\item[148] Rowbotham, 1979; Curthoys, 1988.
\end{footnotes}
anarchist forms of socialism were particularly important in first wave feminism and the early years of second-wave feminism.\textsuperscript{149} The emphasis on non-hierarchical forms of organisation and the objective of complete social and personal transformation appealed to women who felt oppression had both external and internal manifestations. Unlike Marxist feminists, who were often bound by party dogma and the ‘politics of deferment’ of all seemingly non-class issues until after the revolution, anarchist feminists advocated an immediate or prefigurative politics of social and personal change.\textsuperscript{150} Notwithstanding difficulties over the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’, anarchist feminist insights were instructive but have rarely been investigated seriously.\textsuperscript{151}

Those who benefit least from the social order have the most to gain from its progressive transformation. It is no coincidence that the full power of the state is brought to bear on the least powerful in society such as working class women, the unemployed and indigenous peoples.\textsuperscript{152} It is simplistic and patronising to view working class women simply as victims of capitalism. While working class women and their communities are unquestionably exploited under capitalism, they subversively aim to turn the tables at every opportunity. Their politics has to be spontaneous and fluid because working class women only have sufficient resources and energy to undertake actions that produce immediate or foreseeable responses to pressing needs.

\textsuperscript{150} Rowbotham, 1979.
As the Campbelltown interviewees indicated, they are interested in and often work collectively in non-hierarchical, informal and decentralized groups with others of their class. Typically these actions are based on pooling and sharing resources and skills within existing social networks of family and friends. This form of everyday politics has manifold advantages including meeting material needs, reinforcing solidarities and hope, and reducing alienation. These networks constitute a submerged non-capitalist political economy that intersects at strategic points and moments with the capitalist mode of production and state apparatus. The aim is to extract advantages or minimise disadvantages from the capitalist political economy so that they can expand the non-capitalist areas of life where they attempt to exercise autonomy and create equitable social relations.

These working class women try to create and live out a freer and more humane existence here and now. Former Communist Party member, Daphne Gollan, noted the inability of left organisations to grapple with this crucial aspect of struggle:

One pernicious effect of the exclusive concentration on struggle in the public sphere which has characterized Marxist parties, has been the neglect of the question, ‘How shall we live now?’, in favour of the question, ‘What sort of society do we envisage “after the revolution”?’. Recognizing the implicit elitism of deciding for others in the second question, it must also be said that by ignoring the problem of what to do now we failed to see the oppression under our own eyes and connived in its continuation. Working class organisations have rarely attempted to understand or assist working class women in this fundamental political task. Yet it is argued major social transformations

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rarely erupt from atomised working class communities or the bellies of the starving: witness any number of recent famines.\textsuperscript{154} Rebellion requires resources, solidarity, imagination and confidence. These are the tasks that occupy working class women’s everyday lives. Working class women are actively and necessarily engaged in surviving and altering the conditions of life, which, if materialist understandings of social change are to be believed, is the bedrock upon which a better world might be ushered in. How more feasible that transformation might be if greater significance was accorded to the politics of working class women?

Socialist feminist theory helps explain the political economy of working class women. Their recognition of the multiple forms and sites of oppression is a vital insight.\textsuperscript{155} So too the understanding of social change occurring simultaneously in all interconnected areas of life resonates in the experiences of Campbelltown’s working class women.\textsuperscript{156} Their continual efforts to discover more about self and society, in formal educational settings and through mutual learning experiences, as a means of creating a better world were ever-present.\textsuperscript{157} The organisation of social life in small networks of free associations, particularly emphasised in anarchist philosophy, accurately reflects the survival systems of working class women. Cohen explains ‘It is not so much a question of heroines and forgotten women but of times of strength and times of weakness, of open and closed spaces, of great political participation and small-scale social

\textsuperscript{156} Stabile, 1997.
\textsuperscript{157} Rowbotham, 1995.
intervention. Their quest for autonomy and egalitarianism was evident in their denials of managerialism, fatalism, individualism, materialism and their wariness of centralised, hierarchical political formations, such as parliamentary democracy and trade unions. Instead they echoed a desire for decentralisation and self-organisation.

The implementation of these political principles alone is not sufficient to produce a dramatic overthrow of the established order as envisaged in some forms of socialism. What remains to be done is the practical task of uniting with working class women on their own terms. Only then can the eminently difficult task of structural transformation needed to halt the social and ecological wantonness of capital begin in earnest. In the meantime, as libertarian socialists and others advocate, working class women attempt to build a new social order inside the old in order to survive; they live out resistances to control and oppression that might also be a precursor from which larger-scale social shifts might emerge. The English anarchist, Colin Ward, believed a society ‘which organizes itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow.’ Working class women are amongst those hidden seeds, but they are far from dormant.

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159 Gollan, 1980; Marshall, 1993. Marx and Engels (1947[1848], 57) also recognised the radicalizing value of utopian socialism’s critical element, though they were unconvinced of its capacity to mobilise the forces necessary to overthrow capitalism.
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