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Edna Ryan, Women's Activism and the Australian Labour Movement: a Celebration

John Shields

In August 1997, the Sydney Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History organised a well attended one-day conference at the Women's College, Sydney University, to commemorate the life and work of labour movement and feminist activist and intellectual, Edna Minna Ryan, who died on 10 February 1997, aged 92. With her passing, the Society, the labour movement, and the feminist movement lost a tireless, feisty, much-loved and simply irreplaceable campaigner. Edna devoted her long and eventful life to the cause of social justice for working women and their families, and the conference served as a timely reminder of her remarkable achievements as a feminist, trade unionist, political activist and labour historian.

Speakers included industrial relations and labour law scholar Laura Bennett, policy analyst, media commentator and lobbyist, Eva Cox, labour and feminist historian Raelene Frances, documentary film maker Margot Oliver, left and feminist historian, Joyce Stevens, and Edna's daughter and women's studies scholar, Lyndall Ryan. Lyndall's brother John and other members of the Ryan family were also actively involved in the day's proceedings, as were a number of others who had worked closely with Edna in her many campaigns. Discussion of the presentations was free-flowing and, on many occasions, marvellously spirited.

Delivering the keynote address, Eva Cox speculated that Edna herself may well have felt that spending a whole day talking about her simply because she was no longer with us was just a waste of a good political opportunity. Recalling Edna's role as her 'political Godmother' in the 1950s, and their joint involvement in the ALP and Women's Electoral Lobby in the 1970s, Eva observed that Edna had come to occupy an anomalous position in the world of ALP factionalism: 'Neither left nor right, she was distrusted by both sides'. She simply refused to play the factional game - to become a 'factional warrior'. Following Edna's example, Eva contended that the need was to challenge the hegemony of economic agendas within the labour movement and to 'put the "social" back into "socialism"'. Edna, she noted, had viewed the dismantling of centralised arbitration by a Labor government as a fundamental betrayal of the ideal of pay equity. To some, Edna may have seemed a 'difficult woman' but difficult women are also effective women and the challenge, she argued, was to transform institutions so that the ideas of 'difficult' women could be more readily advanced.

Speaking to the theme of 'women and the remaking of Australian labour history', Rae Frances detailed Edna's role as a pioneer of Australian feminist labour history. Remarking on the conceptual 'boldness' of *Gentle Invaders*, Ryan and Conlon's path breaking 1975 historical study of women and work in Australia, Rae noted that, more than two decades on, it remained unequalled in intellectual scope. More than that, the study had given a first airing to many of those issues which have come to dominate Australian feminist historiography over the past two decades. It had also served as a source of inspiration for much of that research: it 'captured the essence

of the issues from the outset' - from the economic contribution of convict women, through the gendered nature of official statistics, to the role of industrial tribunals in structuring pay inequality and the gender division of labour, workplace sexual harassment, and the long struggle of Australian working women for wage justice. In addition, both *Gentle Invaders* and her later study, *Two-Thirds of a Man*, published in 1984, were important in focussing attention on the exclusionary tactics of male trade unions. At the same time, Edna's research had alerted labour historians to the richness of a uniquely Australian source of evidence on the world of work - the voluminous transcripts of arbitral hearings. Even for critics, her work remains an essential point of departure. Above all else, though, her historical studies represented interventions with a decidedly present-centered purpose - asserting the cause of equal pay for work of comparable value. Her historical work, Rae submitted, continues to carry important implications for contemporary feminist strategy.

Lyndall Ryan's address focussed on a crucial yet little known aspect of Edna's political activist, her work in local government as a Labor councillor on Fairfield Municipal Council in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Edna's *cause celebre* during these years was to raise funds towards the construction of an Olympic pool for local children. Drawing on both her own memories and contemporary newspaper reports, Lyndall provided a fascinating inside account of her mother's determined, and ultimately successful, campaign to place the pleasures of public bathing on the already overcrowded agenda a 'municipal socialism'. In the same session, Margot Oliver recounted the challenges and unanticipated rewards associated with the making of her acclaimed video/film biography: 'Edna Ryan: a Political Life'. Margo illustrated her address with a screening of excerpts of her filmed interviews with Edna and reflected on the trials and tribulations of making celluloid history.

The conference concluded with two superb papers by Laura Bennett and Joyce Stevens on the wider industrial and political context of Edna's long involvement in the campaign for equal pay. In a paper entitled 'Edna Ryan, arbitration and equal pay: a legacy at risk', Laura Bennett proposed that what distinguished Edna Ryan's approach to social justice for working women from that of middle class feminists was the belief that collectivist institutions like arbitration tribunals and unions were not irredeemably masculinist; that such institutions could and should be 'reworked' from within to combat gender bias and to assert the rights of working *people*. Building on this point, Laura argued that, in the current context, collectivist strategies of social redress held far more promise than those emphasising individual rights to equal opportunity and individual redress. As Edna Ryan knew only too well, the place to *initiate* successful social change is within the collectivist sphere itself - within the unions, the Labor Party, the arbitral system, the welfare state, and the nation-state in general. If social justice is to prevail against the twin dangers of economic rationalism and globalisation, these institutions, for all of their shortcomings, must be preserved, defended and extended. Joyce Steven's presentation examined the role of women's industrial activism over the past hundred years in achieving advances in women's pay rates and, in particular, the fearless contributions of women like Louisa Lawson, Louisa Dunkley, Lucy Woodcock, Muriel Heagney and Edna Ryan herself. Joyce drew particular attention to the fact that much of this activism was carried out in the face of deliberate opposition and obstructionism by male officials within the unions themselves. (The full text of Joyce's address can be found

in the most recent issue of the Sydney Branch bulletin, *The Hummer*, vol.2, no.9, Summer 1997-98.)

The conference, then, provided a timely and appropriate forum for speakers and participants alike to recall and reflect on the breadth of Edna's social and political commitments and involvements and to take stock of just how much she contributed to pushing back the shadow of inequality, inequity and oppression wherever she encountered it. The conference also served as a reminder that the legacy bequeathed to us by Edna and her militant sisters and brothers can, should and must be defended.

The Sydney Branch is immensely grateful to the speakers themselves, the members of Edna's family, and the management of the Women's College for making the conference such a success. Special thanks, too, to the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand for providing financial support for the conference and to the Women's Electoral Lobby (NSW) for assisting with publicity.