"Lady Cassidy's War": Gender and Class in the Duly and Hansford Strike, Marrickville, N.S.W., 1943

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In mid-1943 munitions workers went on strike at the Duly and Hansford factory in the Sydney suburb of Marrickville. Most of the employees were working class women conscripted by the Manpower Commission. Their wages were set by the Women's Employment Board largely on the basis of union strength within the enterprise. Exploitative working conditions had led to increasing political consciousness and class solidarity among the women workers who went on strike when ten middle class volunteers, led by Gwen Cassidy, undermined their cause by refusing to join a union. Through her employee "voluntarism" Cassidy's conservative industrial activism during the strike revealed important cleavages of class and gender, as she and the factory owners shared in an anti-worker's rights, anti-union and anti-Labour political campaign.

A ten week strike from mid-May to mid-July 1943 occurred at the Duly and Hansford metal factory in Marrickville, an industrial inner Sydney suburb. Not only was it the longest Australian dispute during the Pacific War but it was also technically illegal and the majority of the strikers were women. The strike was caused by the refusal of ten employees in a workforce of one thousand and ninety-one to join a union (Strikers at Duly and Hansford 1943). The strike was precipitated when the factory's unionised workers took one day off in reaction to the Federal Labor Government's refusal to allow paid public holidays to be taken as days of leisure. As they absented themselves on the Monday after Anzac Day (which had fallen on a Sunday) the ten non-strikers remained at work (Gollan 1980, 342). Earlier in April when women unionists stopped work for twenty four hours to force Duly and Hansford to accept a longstanding Women's Employment Board (WEB) wage rates ruling the non-unionists attended their jobs (Lamour 1975). The non-unionists ignored repeated demands that they join a union. Tensions within the factory over this issue escalated. On 15 May, 290 male unionists at the factory went on strike because of the non-unionists' refusal to become unionists. By the 22nd May seven hundred unionists, primarily women in the main workshops, had joined the strike. On 1 June the remaining workers in the Federated Clerks, Storemen and Packers and Transport Workers Union went on strike.¹
The dispute was heard before the Conciliation Commission where the non-unionists represented by their leader, Gwen Cassidy, continued their refusal to join a union (Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration: Transcription of Proceedings 5 June 1943,37). At the end of May the dispute was taken to the Arbitration Court where the presiding judge declared the strike illegal under the National Security Act. Instead of compelling union membership at the factory and a return to work, as was expected, the dispute was referred to the Prime Minister (CAR 1943,154-155).

From this Arbitration ruling until mid-July the factory was strike-bound. Throughout this period all of the contradictions of class and gender, from mass picketing to the newspaper war against the strikers, permeated the dispute. Despite increasing government pressure the resolve of the non-unionists held until the Labor Prime Minister Curtin threatened the cancellation of the factory's war contracts. Thereafter the non-strikers left their employ, the factory's war production recommenced and the strikers avoided prosecution under the National Security Act's provisions (MNSL 1943,588-594.)

Daphne Gollan (1980) has written an illuminating analysis of the anonymous women strikers in this dispute. She examined the worsening working conditions and the growing class solidarity and political consciousness of the "munitioneers" generated by the strike. This paper explores the role of Gwynneth Jeannie Cassidy, the most prominent non-unionist in the dispute. Her presence and persuasion not only galvanised the commitment of the non-unionists but also revealed the strike's faultlines of class and gender.

The majority of the working class women had been conscripted to work at the factory by the Federal Labor government's Manpower Commission in January 1942. As Lynne Beaton (1982,94) notes,

middle class women had wider job claims, and could prepare more effective appeals;
this meant that the target of Manpower was working class women. And it was working class women who were driven into the factories. Penalties for disobeying were severe.

Unlike these women, Cassidy obtained work voluntarily in the factory. Her husband, Sir Jack Cassidy, an influential Sydney barrister had close business dealings with Alfred Duly who lived in the same Darling Point street as the Cassidy's. Cassidy and Duly were executive members of the same Masonic Lodge. Duly offered Mrs Cassidy the job as a gauger in the munitions annexe (Gwynneth Jean Cassidy, interview by the author, Sydney, March 1979). Prior to her factory employment Lady Cassidy worked voluntarily for the Red Cross and the Australian Comforts Fund from the outbreak of the war in 1939 (Gwynneth Jean Cassidy, interview by the author, Sydney, March 1979). Apart from Cassidy six of the other non-unionists women were housewives who volunteered for factory work when war broke out in the Pacific. One had owned a Vaucluse millinery. Peggy Barnes, the sole unmarried woman, had worked as a "casual domestic" for Mrs Cassidy and Mrs F. Howell and Mrs E. Knight (other non-unionists) (Stoppage at Duly and Hansford 1943).

Cassidy was an exemplar of war-time voluntarism. She took this notion of duty to the "national cause" to the Marrickville factory. As Carmel Shute (1980,354) has argued, bourgeois voluntarism reaffirmed
women's role within the family while simultaneously branding women's work outside the home as both cheap and expendable. Voluntarism helped to set the parameters in which the battles for equal pay, conditions and opportunity were waged especially in the later years of the war.

Cassidy's voluntarism was an outstanding feature of the strike in its origins, cause and conclusion.

Voluntarism aside, Cassidy, with the other new women workers at Duly and Hansford, was part of a great wave of female labour which, because of wartime necessity, began to occupy jobs in all sectors of the economy previously reserved solely for men. This "female invasion" provoked fear from male trade unionists. Women were seen as a permanent cheap labour force. To allay this fear the Australian Council of Trade Unions in December 1941 insisted that women workers be awarded equal pay. Employers resisted this demand. The Curtin Labor government found what it believed was a compromise (Lake 1988,205-214). Through the establishment of the WEB the rates of pay, hours and conditions of work for women in jobs performed by men would be regulated. The productivity of the women workers in these occupations would be measured by the WEB to determine their rate of pay which would range between 60 and 100 per cent of men's pay rates (Darian-Smith 1990,55-73; Beaton 1982,88-95; Ryan and Conlon 1975,123-39). The WEB could not establish an industry wide ruling of women's rates of pay. Instead the WEB faced the daunting task of calculating female pay rates in individual enterprises. Whether higher wages for women were achieved was dependant upon existing union strength and the willingness of management (Ryan and Conlon 1975,128-131; Beaton 1982, 89-92). Such a problem existed at Duly and Hansford where management historically had been reluctant to accept or endorse worker's rights.

During the 1930s depression the Duly and Hansford factory was known locally as "Boys Town" because of its recruitment, exploitation and sacking of numerous junior male workers. From manufacturing nuts and bolts and hand tools in the 1930s by October 1940 it had become the first government annexe producing munitions (Gollan 1980, 341). Through its contracts with the Federal government to deliver war equipment Duly and Hansford was able to expand production, allow the price of labour to rise and replace male youth workers with adult women. Management's attitudes to its labour force remained paternalistic. The original partners of the firm, Alfred Duly and George Hansford, were still engaged in their factory's daily running (Manpower Problems of Duly and Hansford Ltd 1940). Duly, the production manager, kept employees ignorant of their rights and resisted the presence of unionism on the factory floor. In 1941, when organisers of the Federated Ironworkers Association (FIA) attempted to recruit members at the Duly and Hansford factory, they were refused admittance. After the organisers gained right of entry under the Metal Trades Award Duly allowed them to speak to individual workers but not address them as a group. When a mass meeting to discuss union issues was held in the street outside the factory Alfred Duly's secretary, Jane Penrose, took notes of what was said. At shift changes the managing director, George Hansford, addressed workers on the evils of unionism as they gathered at the Bundy
The outgoing shift listened in their own time, the incoming in the firm's and were expected to make up lost production time - without payment. By 1943, because of wartime labour shortages, industrial conscription and protected occupations "employers found it difficult to sack workers simply for being unionists" (Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration 18 June 1943, 57). The vast majority of the Duly and Hansford workers were members of either the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), the Australasian Society of Engineers (ASE) or the FIA. These unions' efforts to establish themselves at the Marrickville factory were resisted by the management at every turn.

The factory's working conditions had worsened because of the speed-up in production and the three split shifts seven days a week necessitated by the war (Labour and Industrial Relations: Strike at Duly and Hansford 1943). Dot Gray, an FIA delegate during the 1943 strike, remembers the terrible noise and black oil everywhere, on the machine and floor. Boils and pimples broke out on worker's faces and arms from the oil. Shoes and boots were ruined on the oil-soaked concrete floor. Workers tried and failed to have management buy them boiler suits to toil in the factory filth. (Dot Gray, interview by the author, Ourimbah, NSW, 12 January 1998)

By 1943 a generalised war weariness prevailed amongst workers in essential industries. The dirt, noise, shiftwork, speed-ups and abrasive relations with the Duly and Hansford management were proving intolerable to a restive workforce. The Curtin Labor Government refused to allow paid public holidays to be taken as days of leisure and as a result many workers took the Monday following Anzac Day (which had fallen on a Sunday) as a holiday. An added frustration were Duly and Hansford's repeated refusals to accept the jurisdiction of the WEB and their withholding of the payment of higher wages to women workers after the WEB rates ruling (Lamour 1975,49-51).

Over the fifteen month period of factory employment Cassidy consistently refused to join any of the metal unions. She gathered around herself a group of mainly married middle class women and one single middle class young man, Owen Andrews, whose father was the director of Andrews Funerals. These women and the man had voluntarily become factory workers out of a sense of patriotic duty. Many of them had husbands, brothers or sons in the armed services (Bulletin 9 June 1943). Yet this was also true of the women who went on strike. In 1943 the Cassidys had a three year old son, James, who was cared for by a live-in domestic housekeeper as Mr Cassidy worked in the courts and Mrs Cassidy measured components in the factory. Mrs Cassidy was driven to work daily by a chauffeur (Stoppage at Duly and Hansford 1943). Most other women workers caught trains, buses and trams or walked to work. Several of the non-unionist volunteers in the annexe like Cassidy were given a set shift of 7am until 3pm as the resentments and antagonisms at the factory intensified (Daily Mirror 18 July 1943).

When the dispute went before the Conciliation Commissioner G. A. Morney, Mrs Cassidy alone spoke on behalf of the non-unionists. Cassidy argued that she was not opposed to voluntary unionism but to compulsory unionism. She believed that "the strike was unpatriotic as it was endangering the lives of those in the fighting services at
the front line" (Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration 18 June 1943,3). The male union officials at the Conciliation hearing argued that the employer should persuade the non-unionists to join a union. They pointed out that it was unfair for non-unionists to gain the benefits that members had paid their dues for the union to fight for, adding that everything won at Duly and Hansford "had to be prized out of the firm" (Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration 20 June 1943, 71).

As the factory's production slumped by the end of May the dispute was taken to the Arbitration Court where Judge O'Mara declared the strike illegal under amendments to the National Security Act. O'Mara delivered this judgement on 18 May 1943, three days after the strike had commenced. O'Mara declined to exercise the power of the Court to compel union membership at Duly and Hansford to return to work and referred the matter to the Executive, that is, the Labor Prime Minister, John Curtin (CAR 1943, 154-56).

At the Arbitration hearing Cassidy was represented by J. Shand, a leading barrister and a close friend of Jack Cassidy. Shand's services were offered freely to the non-unionists' cause (Sun 21 June 1943). While Alfred Duly at the Court made vivid his hatred of the union's encroachment on his authority in the factory, Mrs Cassidy expressed her experience of male union officials in flawless class terms: "All the time they have treated us like common wharf labourers" (Daily Telegraph 18 June 1943).

Under Shand's instructions Cassidy proved a fluent, well prepared, disciplined and formidable witness. She was never shaken in her stand by the unions' advocates. She insisted that she was not opposed to unions although she would never join one because she could not support strikes in wartime. Occasionally her animus towards the organised working class was revealed when she stated that

from various pin-pricks and interference from the unions the volunteer women were gradually losing the privileges which the management had been good enough to concede to them. (Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration 18 June 1943, 27)

When asked by the FIA advocate if she supported the union's action in attempting to secure 90 percent of the men's rate of pay for women workers calculated by the WEB, Cassidy replied "I think we are overpaid as it is" (Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration 18 June 1943, 35).

From the day of the Arbitration Court's judgement until the end of the strike the Duly and Hansford factory was effectively mass picketed by striking women workers. They denounced the non-unionists as "crawlers" and "scabs" (Daily Telegraph 1 July 1943). In the New South Wales Parliament, Ivor Tannock, a Labor MLC and secretary of the Sydney Branch of the Ironworkers, referred to the non-unionists as "loathsome toads" (NSW Parliamentary Debates 1943, 3829). Jack McPhillips, general secretary of the Munitions Workers Union, attacked Mrs Cassidy and the other non-unionists' claim that they were concerned with the war effort. He agreed with Mrs Cassidy that she was overpaid "as her husband was a KC who regularly appeared for the employers" (SMH July 6, 1943).
In the Federal Parliament Eddie Ward, Minister for Labour and National Service and Labor Member for East Sydney, suggested that a deputation of women strikers from Duly and Hansford factory told him that Mrs Cassidy had spent a good deal of her time before even the dispute began not in attending to the work for which she was paid, but doing cross-word puzzles with the assistance of the foreman. (Australia, House of Reps, 1 July 1943, 23)

Ward asked how Mrs Cassidy assisted the war effort:

She has a young child. When she decided to go into the factory, answering, according to honorable members opposite, the appeal to people engaged in domestic service to go into factories to increase the production of munitions, she has to engage a domestic to look after her child so that while we gain one woman for the war effort, we lose another. Therefore she is not helping production. If she wanted to assist the war effort, the proper thing to do, irrespective of her own feelings, was to stay at home and look after her own child, thus allowing the domestic to go into the factory. (Australia, House of Reps, 1 July 1943, 23)

If the labour movement critics of the non-unionists were vigorous and personally venomous towards Mrs Cassidy, the Sydney Morning Herald, the Bulletin and the Daily Telegraph portrayed the non-unionists as patriotic martyrs who were unwilling to yield to trade union bullying. Throughout the strike the Sydney press gave ample space to the views of Mrs Cassidy who was constantly referred to as "the wife of Mr J. E. Cassidy, KC." Mrs Cassidy became their image of Australian womanhood concerned only with individual liberty at home and the fate of the men in the battle zones. It was claimed that Mrs Cassidy received over one hundred letters of support for her stand from enlisted men during the course of the strike (Sunday Telegraph 18 July 1943).

The Federal Labor Government's response to the Arbitration Court's judgement on the Duly and Hansford dispute was inept and heavy handed. When D. L. Bellemore, the Deputy Director General of the Manpower Directorate, visited the factory to advise the non-unionists that they could be directed anywhere in Australia to work, Cassidy interrogated him. One of the non-unionists, Mrs McLeod, a former secretary, recorded the Bellemore-Cassidy encounter. To Bellemore's embarrassment, it appeared in the Sydney newspapers the following day. Bellemore was portrayed as doing the union's bidding (SMH 2 July 1943; Daily Mirror 2 My 1943).

The second of the government's interventions proved more disastrous. Ward, the Minister for Labour, sent Jock Garden, his liaison officer, with the unions and an AEU official to persuade "the volunteers" to join the AEU. Garden's overtures were rejected. The encounter between Garden and Cassidy became an argument. Garden was recorded by Mrs McLeod as shouting "if you want the war effort, Mrs Cassidy, I'll put you where you'll get plenty, up to your neck in dirt." Mrs Cassidy's martyrdom was eulogised in the press (SMH 5 June 1943).

By late June 1943, the eighth week of the strike, the Attorney General, Dr H. V. Evatt, instructed police officers to discover who was responsible for the strike and whether the management, in spite of its proclaimed neutrality, was supporting the non-unionists (Stoppage at Duly and Hansford 1943). Each of the non-unionists, with the exception of
Mrs Cassidy, was briefly interviewed at their separate residences at the request of Alfred Duly. Their collective story was revealed by Mrs Cassidy in the *Daily Telegraph* (1 July 1943). Cassidy claimed the non-unionists were "grilled" by the police officers because they refused to join any union that reserves the right to strike against the law.

The conservative opposition in the federal parliament railed against the Labor government's failure not only to resolve the dispute but also the measures taken against the non-unionists. Eric Harrison, the United Australia Party (UAP) Member for Wentworth and a personal friend of the Cassidyys, likened the actions of the police officers to the Gestapo serving a government that demanded compulsory unionism. He accused the police "of persecuting lawful upright citizens" (Australia, House of Reps, 1 July 1943, 20-21). Harold Holt, the UAP Member for Faulkner, outlined a conspiracy by union officials and the Labor Government to establish compulsory unionism, with the Duly and Hansford dispute as the catalyst. He reminded the House that, "we are shortly to appear before the people. This is one of the matters with respect to which they will want to be fully informed." Holt demanded that "parliament not be dissolved until each representative declared their position on compulsory unionism" (Australia, House of Reps, 1 July 1943, 15-16). In reply, Ward, the Minister for Labour, argued that the non-unionists consciously or unconsciously did not stand alone. They had been strengthened by management's assurances who in turn were "supported by employers' federations, the United Australia Party and certain legal gentlemen outside the dispute." Ward believed that if Mrs Cassidy had been removed from the workshop early in the dispute the non-union resistance would have collapsed (Australia, House of Reps, 1 July 1943, 22).

Regretting the firm's capitulation, Mrs Cassidy said that the non-unionists sought to be released from their occupations so that production would continue. They toasted their departure for the newspapers. By legal fiat the Labor Government did not prosecute the strikers as their strike commenced two days before amendments to the National Security Act outlawed strikes in war industries (*MNSL* 1943, 588-594).

Although unusual in its length, the Duly and Hansford strike was one of an increasing number of shorter unofficial strikes in early 1943. Women workers in a variety of industries seeking higher pay for their productivity as assessed by the WEB, and denied by employers, took strike action. The strike at Marrickville lasted longer because of the determined "voluntarism" of the ten non-union employees led by Lady Cassidy, supported by managerial intransigence, and the industrial and political damage such "voluntarism" could inflict upon both the union movement and the Curtin Labor Government.

The striking women workers could claim only a temporary industrial victory as they returned to work. By December 1945, three months after the end of the war in the Pacific, these women workers lost their jobs through the closure of the munitions annexe and the cessation of government contracts. After denying Eddie Ward's accusation that she and her husband were acting on behalf of the UAP during the strike, Mrs Cassidy - or "Lady Cassidy" as the strikers anointed her - and her husband became executive officers of the New South Wales Division of the newly formed Liberal Party in 1944, the successor of the UAP (Ritchie 1993, 387-88).
Unlike earlier conservative middle class women dedicated to "industrial peace" such as Adela Pankhurst Walsh and the Australian Women's Guild of Empire (AWGE) (Castle 1980; Summers 1980), Gwen Cassidy, and her fellow non-unionists were inside the factory at the point of production. Pankhurst Walsh and the AWGE were outside propagandists, not industrial activists. As a "voluntary employee", Cassidy utilised her gender and her establishment legal and political connections and resources to wage a damaging anti-union, anti-Labor campaign. Throughout the dispute Cassidy was a woman working outside her normal set of class relations. In the factory world of paid work her ideas and behaviour disrupted accepted industrial practice. None of her male protagonists, from Ward, the Labour Minister, to seasoned union officials, knew how to effectively criticise or weaken her industrial position. Perhaps no other participant in the dispute was more conscious of their gender and class than Lady Cassidy, non-unionist extraordinaire.

NOTES

1 A detailed chronology of the strike is found in "Industrial Dispute - Duly and Hansford Pty Ltd - Employment of Non-unionists, 1943." MP1007/7, Item 249/451/4. Australian Archives, Sydney.

2 Gwynneth Jeanne Cassidy (nee Waterhouse) was born in 1905. She attended Kambala, a private girls school at Rose Bay. In 1925 she toured the United States of America and Europe before being presented at court during the King of England's birthday celebrations. She married John Evelyn Cassidy, a barrister in December 1928. Jack Cassidy was knighted in 1933. During the 1930s Mrs Cassidy was a keen golfer playing off a low handicap. She also became an energetic member of the Rose Bay branch of the Red Cross Society and other charities. A close family friend of the Cassidy's was the powerful retailer, Sydney Snow, who was chairman of the Finance and Consultative Committee of the United Australia Party of which the Cassidys were members. Gwynneth Jeanne Cassidy, interview by author, Darling Point, Sydney, March 1979.


4 Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. 18 June 1943,42; 19 June 1943,17-23. Such management practices were not peculiar to Duly and Hansford. Murray and White (1982, Chs. 4-6) suggest that these practices were common throughout the Australian metal industry throughout the thirties and the early stages of the Pacific War.

5 A favourable sketch of Cassidy and the other non-unionists is found in Daily Telegraph, 17 July 1943 and 19 July 1943. A more detached view will be found in "Stoppage at Duly and Hansford, 1943." A472, Item W14021.
"Duly and Hansford Ltd - Post War Car Part Manufacture, 1945 -," MT105/12, Item 44/108/26B. Australian Archives, Sydney. This file notes "management's decision to retrench all of its female employees because of the considerable contraction in production."

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