



From the Archives:

Kath Williams (1895-1975)

by Nick G.

*The following article is taken from a section of our website devoted to deceased comrades who played an important role in the development of our Party. This section can be found in the 'About Us' drop down menu and is called **Our Comrades**. The two articles that follow were written by Kath Williams herself in the mid-60s.*

One of the outstanding proletarian foundation members of our Party was Comrade Kath Williams.

Kath was born on the 23rd April, 1895, in a small town just to the north of Geelong. She graduated as a teacher from the Melbourne College of Domestic Economy in 1915.

On 31 March 1917 she married Percy James Clarey, a young trade union leader.

Kath supported and encouraged his political ambitions within the Labor Party. She became secretary of its Caulfield branch, president of the Women's Organising Committee and a member of the State executive. She stood as Labor candidate for the seat of Caulfield in the Legislative Assembly election of 1935 but withdrew before the poll. In December, with Maurice Blackburn and others, she was excluded from the A.L.P., having spoken at a rally organized by the Victorian Council against War and Fascism; contrary to the party's policy, she advocated that sanctions be imposed against Italy, after its invasion of Abyssinia. She was reinstated the following year.

Her refusal to toe the ALP line aggravated tensions on the domestic front. Her rejection of social democracy led her to join the Communist Party in 1936, and in December of that year she and Percy were divorced.

Kath resumed teaching in 1938, at Portland, and in 1942 transferred to Wonthaggi, where she threw herself into local activities and supported the miners. On 11 August 1945 she married an English-born coalminer, Anthony ('Andy')



Williams. He wanted to return to England, and Kath went with him, but the marriage didn't last. In 1948 she returned alone to Melbourne to work for the Liquor Trades Union. She won a position on the state committee of the Communist Party in the same year, which she used primarily to promote equal pay for women; she also fought for this as union delegate to the Melbourne Trades Hall Council.

She presented the case for equal pay as union delegate to the Melbourne Trades Hall Council and, after the Australian Council of Trade Unions'



congress of 1953 agreed to establish equal pay committees in each State, she was elected secretary of the Victorian committee. She also became a delegate to A.C.T.U. conferences. An observer at the first World Conference of Working Women, held in Budapest in 1956, she presented a paper on the campaign in Australia. When she returned, she wrote a booklet about the struggle, *Equality Will Be Won* (1956).

The Equal Pay Committee set about organising protests, including annual Equal Pay Weeks, petitions and speakers for stop-work meetings.

Industrial militancy and the strength of the union movement proved to be the key factor in winning equal pay. In 1962 a large and important strike for equal pay occurred at the Commonwealth Industrial Gases (CIG) in Preston, Melbourne. The company announced that it wanted to replace up to 30 percent of its existing workforce with women, on the 75 percent female rate. A mass meeting of the CIG workers, mostly from the Amalgamated Engineering Union, decided that they would not oppose women being employed, as long as it was on the full male rate. Negotiations with management broke down and the workers went on strike, joined by the Liquor Trades Union (LTU) canteen workers, who were mostly women. Around 1,000 workers were involved in the strike.

The question of how to respond to the employment of women on lower rates was a genuine concern in the 1960s, as increased mechanisation was used by employers as an excuse to move women into traditionally male dominated industries. The response from the union movement was mixed. The CIG metal unions gave a positive example, but the right-wing Vehicle Builders showed the negative, responding to the threat by attempting to exclude women from the industry. The Equal Pay Committee pointed out that this was a short-sighted approach that was never going to work. Not only were bosses going to continue to push for women workers while the rate was cheaper but, fundamentally, women had the right and the need to work.

Strikes and other struggles for equal pay continued to consume Kath's energies throughout the late 60s and early 70s. However, growing revisionism within the Australian communist movement also took up her time. As a leading member of the CPA in Victoria, she sided with Ted Hill and others who could accept neither the changes that Khrushchev was imposing on the international communist movement, nor the undermining of the Australian Party's revolutionary ideology and politics at the hands of Sharkey, Dixon, Aarons and others.

A fierce ideological struggle occurred at the Victorian State Conference of the CPA in April 1963, and Kath's powerful speech denouncing the revisionists was included in the seminal booklet *Defend Marxism-Leninism* published later that year.

Resigning from the CPA in the aftermath of its State Conference, Williams worked with Hill and other comrades to establish Vanguard as a voice for genuine Communists. She contributed a number of articles, and although most writers for the paper did not identify themselves, her standing within the peace and women's movements was such that prominence was given to her as the author of two articles.

In *Vanguard* Vol 1 no. 9 (March 1964), coinciding with the founding conference of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist), Kath published, under her own name the article "Equal Pay – Basic Wage Rise: The Two Struggles Cannot be Separated". This condemned a decision by the Trades Hall Council Executive to reject a call to distribute its basic wage leaflet and equal pay leaflets together. The Executive argued that the latter would detract from former. Williams attacked this division of the working class. She said a joint leaflet should be issued: "...equal pay is not a question for women, but a class question, affecting the whole class in the struggle for higher living standards."

In *Vanguard* Vol 1 no 21 (August 1964), Kath wrote a lengthy report on the 10th World Conference Against A & H Bombs which she was



“privileged to attend as a member of the Australian delegation”. She described the conference as a “Glorious Victory for Peace” as it had rejected a ploy by the Soviet revisionists and their supporters to set up an opposition peace conference to water down opposition to imperialism and push a reformist line upon the peace movement. It was a “glorious victory” because the 3000 delegates rejected the splittists and insisted on opposition to imperialism and support for peace, national independence and freedom.

Meanwhile, the Equal Pay Committee was being undermined by the social democratic right-wing Labor leaders of the THC Executive. They were also being undermined by the ACTU because of its refusal to put an equal pay claim before the Commission, and indeed it had ordered its affiliates not to do so.

In 1967 the Labor right split with key left wing unions. It was the left unions that were the strongest advocates for equal pay and most active on the Equal Pay Committee. So, when the split occurred the remaining VTHC turned on Kath Williams and the Committee and dissolved it in late 1968.

Kath was by now in her 70s, and in 1967 she had retired as an organiser for the LTU.

Her active role in the union movement may have ended, but she continued with her mass work until her death on 17 April 1975.

In 2001, fellow equal pay campaigner and member of the CPA, Zelda D’Aprano wrote a

biography of Kath titled *Kath Williams: the unions and the fight for equal pay*. In her introduction to the book, D’Aprano says “Kath Williams made an outstanding contribution to the trade union movement and to the achievement of equal pay.”

She also made an outstanding achievement to the repudiation of modern revisionism, to the defense of Marxism-Leninism and to the growth of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist).

