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Vale Doreen Borrow

By Dr Alexander Brown



Doreen Borrow (1) with Monica Chalmers, Mairi Petersen, and Robynne Murphy
Doreen Borrow, communist, trade unionist, and peace activist who gave her life to the struggle for peace and socialism, died on Friday 25 July 2025, aged 98. She is survived by her children David, Susan, Stephen, and Kathryn.

Doreen was born in 1926 and grew up in the small mining town of Captains Flat in the Monaro district of NSW. The town developed during a short-lived mining boom in the late nineteenth century. Despite promises of a revival in the late 1920s, which prompted Doreen's father to move his family to the town and sink what little money they had into a billiard hall, it was hit hard by the Great Depression. Doreen grew up in poverty but recalled that she had never gone hungry and enjoyed a happy childhood sustained by her mother's optimism and her father's poetry and storytelling, told by the fire during the town's cold winters.

Like many working-class women of her generation, Doreen received a very limited education and was soon working, married and then having her first child. The Captains Flat miners were militant unionists. There was a significant strike in 1948/49 and a lockout in 1954/55 lasting seven months apiece. Nevertheless, the unions, Doreen recalled, were concerned exclusively with the affairs of men. On 21 November 1957 Doreen's husband David Borrow was killed in a mining accident at the age of 32. With four children and few

prospects in a small rural town, Doreen took what little compensation she received for her husband's death and took off for Wollongong with her four children, new partner, and dog.

Doreen arrived in Wollongong in 1960 and obtained employment as a postal worker at a time when the Postmaster General's office was begrudgingly employing women. This enabled her to provide for her children. Doreen became a member of the Amalgamated Postal Workers Union (APWU). Discovering that she was being paid only half the male rate for equivalent work ignited Doreen's fire for political activism. Despite the often hostile attitude of male unionists, she fought for equal pay, employment and educational opportunities for women, paid maternity leave, superannuation, holiday pay, and sick leave. She joined the Wollongong Working Women's Charter Committee (WWWCC) to fight around these issues. Doreen was honorary sub-branch secretary of her union from 1968 until 1991 and a delegate to the South Coast Labour Council (SCLC) for 17 years. She was later made a Life Member of the SCLC.

Doreen also joined the Communist Party of Australia in 1960 and took a particular interest in peace issues. She recalled in an interview with the *Illawarra Mercury* having signed the Stockholm Peace Appeal in 1949 and campaigning at Wollongong Railway Station to Ban the Bomb during the Cold War. She was involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement from its very early days, when most Australians still supported the war. On one occasion she was part of a demonstration in Martin Place, Sydney, that was attended by just 15 people. She recalled the fear she felt as passersby spat on the demonstrators, calling them 'Red Rats'. In Wollongong she was active in the Save Our Sons movement against conscription.

As president of the South Coast Branch of the Australian Peace Committee, Doreen was involved in the campaign to make Wollongong a City of Peace, leading to the Council's first declaration to this effect in 1980. This was later followed by a similar declaration by Shellharbour Council. Her peace activism took her to many places few Australians visited during the Cold War, including Cuba, the USSR, and Iraq. In 1980 she travelled to Sofia, Bulgaria, to take part in a World Peace Parliament representing her union. In 1983 she was nominated as a councillor to the World Peace Council

based in Helsinki. She was awarded the Media Prize of the United Nations Association of Australia in 1981 and 1982 in recognition of her work promoting peace.

After the end of the Cold War, it became possible for some of the Australians whose activities in support of socialism had brought them to the attention of ASIO and the NSW Police Special Branch to obtain copies of their files. Doreen obtained copies of both and in an article in *Illawarra Unity* used her file to show how extensive the surveillance of herself and fellow communists and unionists in Wollongong had been. She eloquently expressed the horror of this undemocratic practice of surveillance and captured the way trivialities and inaccuracies took up the bulk of the files, including extensive commentary on her appearance. She learned that this surveillance had led to her daughter's public service file had been marked to block promotion, something that happened to many friends and relatives of prominent communists.

I first met Doreen in late 2001 when a group of people in Wollongong came together to establish a new peace organization, Network Opposing War and Repression (NO WAR), to try to stop American reprisals against Afghanistan and Iraq after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Together we built a significant local movement, including holding a demonstration in 2003 attended by 5,000 people, the largest peace demonstration in Wollongong's history. NO WAR continued to oppose the war on terror and the increasingly draconian domestic repression associated with it for many years. Doreen, with her characteristic tenacity, was one of the few who kept up the struggle long after the American invasion of Iraq. In the years since I mostly caught up with Doreen on Hiroshima Day, when she would organize the annual commemoration around the 1986 International Year of Peace Plaque together with fellow veterans of the Hiroshima Day Committee, Marg Perrott and Mairi Petersen.

In the 2000s Doreen wrote a series of articles in *Illawarra Unity* on her early recollections of life in Captains Flat. They form a unique testament of life in an Australian mining town. In 2000, she travelled to Captains Flat to deliver a speech in dedication of the Captains Flat Miners Memorial, built to honour the lives of the miners who had lost their lives there between 1938 and 1962.

I haven't seen Doreen much in the past decade or so as I travelled extensively and had my own children. When I saw her some years ago at the Jobs for Women film premier in Warrawong with baby on my chest, however, I recall her first question was: "How are things going with the peace movement?"

In February this year I visited Doreen for the first time in many years to talk with her about the Peace Movement Illawarra exhibition now showing at Wollongong City Library. Though Doreen felt too unwell to be interviewed for the exhibition, we enjoyed a cuppa together with her son Steve and Doreen shared with me some of her memories of her active life and close association with the Port Kembla waterfront. Shortly after that visit, she moved into aged care.

Doreen was a stalwart of the communist, peace, and union movements during times of incredible hardship and struggle that helped to define Wollongong and its unique political culture. I feel fortunate to have known her and to have fought alongside her.

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