Highlights from the history of International Women’s Day

The very first IWD was held in the year 1911, on March 19, in Germany, Austria, Denmark and a few other European countries. A million leaflets calling for action on the right to vote were distributed throughout Germany before IWD.

The most memorable IWD was held in Petrogard (now St Petersburg) in March 1917. A demonstration by women gathered strength and passion as they swept through the city, launching the first revolution in 1917.

The first Australian IWD rally took place in the Sydney Domain on March 25, 1928. It called for equal pay for equal work, an 8 hour day for shop girls, no piece work, the basic wage for the unemployed, and annual holidays on full pay.

In 1929, in addition to a social and dance in Brisbane and a Sydney Domain rally, there was also on IWD rally in Sydney’s Belmore Park in support of the wives and families of striking timber workers. Men were far more prominent than women in the audience.

1931 saw the first IWD marches in Sydney and in Melbourne. In Sydney headed a march with banners demanding, among other things equal pay for equal work.

1936 was a major turning point for IWD and in Sydney the first IWD Committee embracing a number of women’s groups was formed.

In 1939 Sydney IWD meeting was described as the largest and most representative yet held. During the war years from 1940-45, IWD was a continuing vehicle for discussion about equal pay and child care, with the main emphasis on the war effort.

In 1958, Sydney IWD held an international handcrafts and jewellery exhibition in Anthony Horderns store. It was televised.

In 1962, three Soviet women visited for IWD. In Sydney, the public rally for the Soviet visitors was preceded by a peace walk through the streets and this walk became an annual IWD event in Sydney and Melbourne.

The first of the large IWD marches took place in 1972. From then on, IWD marches generally took place on the Saturday morning nearest to March 8. The term “march” is really a misnomer for mostly they were more like a walk through the streets with a party atmosphere. Estimates of the numbers who marched from Sydney Town Hall to Hyde Park in 1972 ranged from 2 000 to 5 000.

In Australia, the Whitlam government chose IWD 1974 to announce that the government was preparing an official program for International Women’s Year.

During International Women’s Year in 1975, IWD was given official recognition by the United Nations.

In 1980 Sydney marchers distributed purple and white gladiolas to women shoppers, with a leaflet headed “Glad to be women”.

Source: Womenspace March 2004