



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Australian women protest conscription during Vietnam War [Save Our Sons (SOS)], 1965-1972

Time period notes: *When conscription was abolished in December 1972, the SOS campaign achieved their goals and SOS groups across Australia disbanded. The exact date in December is unknown.*

13 May

1965

to: December

1972

Country: Australia

Location City/State/Province: Sydney

Location Description: *Cities and towns throughout the country. Chapters of SOS were established across the country beginning in Sydney in May 1965*

Goals:

The goal of the campaign was to promote the rights of conscientious objectors and draft resisters and to repeal of the National Service Act passed in 1964, which required the conscription of men who were not yet eligible to vote.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation › Created a network of suburban safe houses to help draft resisters evade police

- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Women handed out anti-conscription pamphlets whilst on government property and refused to leave
- 175. Overloading of facilities › Filling out mock registration forms to overwhelm the processing of conscripts

Notes on Methods:

Order unknown. Simultaneous action by different SOS chapters took place across the country. Above examples are listed; however, there may be more than one instance of each type of nonviolent resistance

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Women and mothers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Joan Coxsedge, Jean McLean, Chris Cathie, Jo McLaine Ross, Irene Miller, Margaret Reynolds, Joyce Golgerth, and Pat Ashcroft (not all known)

These women were leaders of the group Save Our Sons (SOS)

Partners:

Youth Campaign Against Conscription (YCAC), Australian Labour Party (ALP), Draft Resistance Movement (DRM), Congress for International Co-operation and Disarmament (CICD)

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Not known

Segment Length: *Approximately 1 year 3 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Government and government supporters.

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Women faced abuse like spitting and pushing, assault, arrest, and imprisonment throughout campaign

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

In conjunction with other individual campaigns, SOS helped to abolish national conscription in 1972, seven years after the campaign began. Alone the SOS campaign would most likely not have successfully abolished conscription.

The “Gulf of Tonkin Incident” in early August 1964 marked the beginning of dramatic escalation of the United States’ involvement in the civil war in Vietnam. As a close ally, Australia made a commitment to support the United States’ intervention in Southeast Asia. To support the war effort, Prime Minister Robert Menzies’s Liberal government introduced conscription for national military service on November 10, 1964. A few months later on April 29, Menzies announced that Australian troops, including National Service conscripts, would be sent to Vietnam to assist in the American war effort. Two weeks after this announcement, on May 13, fifteen Sydney women, led by Joyce Golgerth and Pat Ashcroft, met and founded Save Our Sons (SOS), a non-political, non-sectarian community action group to oppose conscription. Other branches were later established in Melbourne, Wollongong, Brisbane, Perth, Newcastle, Townsville, and Adelaide.

SOS fought for the rights of conscientious objectors and draft resisters, and for the repeal of the National Service Act, especially the clauses that provided for long periods of compulsory service and severe penalties for infringement. In order to be considered exempt from national service on the basis of conscientious objection, applicants needed to demonstrate that they objected all war, not merely just the Vietnam War. Thus, the rate of success for conscientious objection applications was often low. SOS focused on the conscription of men under the age of 18 who were not eligible to vote because they believed conscription of minors disregarded individual parental attitudes and moral convictions.

Most SOS members were middle and working class women, wives and mothers who had no connection to the radical youth counter-culture and were just beginning to understand the war. As part of SOS, members educated themselves and others about the conflict in Vietnam and the laws associated with conscription and conscientious objection. SOS believed that the conflict between North and South Vietnam should be negotiated diplomatically and nonviolently. Although initially complete novices at political activism, SOS members quickly learned to raise funds, to organize public meetings, rallies, teach-ins, protest marches, and to publish and disseminate relevant information. While chapter-level protests were initially relatively small, SOS contributed to what became a much larger, successful nonviolent campaign against conscription.

Nonviolent actions and activities varied by branch; those of the Sydney chapter included support for the Canberra vigil of Bishops and Clergy, interviews with Federal Ministers, a petition to the Prime Minister, marching in the Hiroshima Day march and press, radio and television interviews. The SOS chapter in Melbourne, founded by Jean McLean, held regular vigils in Melbourne's City Square, where members walked in silent protest while holding up anti-war placards. Often during activities SOS women wore sashes to identify themselves. At a protest led by C.C. Cairns and Jean McLean, women wore reversible capes, which they opened to reveal political slogans. Members handed out draft registration forms and encouraged people to fill them in under false identities in order to overload the registration system.

Networking with like-minded organizations was an important component of the campaign. In 1968, SOS worked with other groups, including the Draft Resistance Movement (DRM), to engage in civil disobedience across from the Swan Street army barrack gates. Similarly, Congress for International Cooperation and Disarmament (CICD), SOS, and other members of the DRM organized a Freedom Ride to the Sale prison to bring attention to the imprisonment of Brian Ross, one of the original resisters, who was serving a two-year sentence. Irene Miller, a mother of ten and a grandmother, helped form a network of suburban safe houses to help draft resisters evade police. This underground network actively challenged the system rather than simply helping young men escape or avoid conscription. The Underground Fund Committee was set up in Melbourne with representation from SOS, the DRM, the Moratorium, and Catholic worker group to establish a network of contacts and safe households. Margaret Reynolds, founder of the Townsville SOS chapter, conducted street opinion polls to gauge public opinion on conscription. While SOS members refrained from shouting slogans and taunting opponents or engaging in any violence, they faced hostility from those who supported the government policy and were repeatedly denied permits to conduct public activities.

On account of their activities the women received negative publicity, lost their jobs and grew alienated from former friends. SOS members were widely condemned as hysterical and naïve mothers, community dupes, rabble rousers, and bimbos. Throughout the campaign they were abused, assaulted, arrested, and jailed. However, their dignity and determination in the face of opposition helped them to win sympathy and respect. In April 1971 five Save Our Sons members—Jean McLean, Joan Coxsedge, Irene Miller, Chris Cathie and Jo McLaine Ross—were arrested and jailed for 14 days in Fairlea Women's Prison in Melbourne for handing out anti-conscription pamphlets while on government property. This group, which became known as the "Fairlea Five," greatly increased publicity for SOS and its campaign against laws prohibiting the distribution of leaflets was seen as a victory for progressive activists.

Public opinion on the war changed dramatically with the reaction to the Tet Offensive in 1968, unprecedented media coverage of the Mai Lai Massacre and the steadily raising death toll. With growing public pressure, Liberal Prime Minister Bill McMahon announced that Australian combat troops would be withdrawn at the end of 1971. When the Whitlam Labor government was elected in 1972 it adopted this policy and ended conscription. With their objective achieved, SOS shut down operations soon thereafter.

There had been numerous other anti-conscription organizations and campaigns. Active non-compliers, and self-identified Draft Resisters, wrote letters to the Minister for National Service outlining their intentions not to comply with conscription and later went on to form the Draft Resisters' Union. Additionally, the Youth Campaign Against Conscription instituted draft card burning, whereby they actively protested the government's policies by destroying their registration cards. Related to these efforts was increased attention in the mass media to the war and the rising death toll.

Were it not for the other campaigns against conscription and the war, it is unlikely the SOS campaign alone would have been successful. Margaret Reynolds doubted her "ad hoc approach to advocacy in Townsville made much impact," however, she is said, "[SOS] certainly influenced my development...in a community that defined a woman by her husband's career."

Even though a part of the larger whole, the SOS women's taking such early initiatives to increase public awareness about the war was an important part of the campaign to end conscription. Further, the women's sheer persistence and continuing passion made the SOS a key part of the larger antiwar movement.

Research Notes

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Hadley L. Stein, 27/11/2011

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