

KEMIRA DIARY OF A STRIKE

A film by
Tom Zubrycki



A METRO STUDY SUPPLEMENT

KEMIRA — DIARY OF A STRIKE is a film which documents a 1982 coalminers' strike in Wollongong, NSW in terms of its human effects on working class people — the strikers themselves. The film maker, Tom Zubrycki, was at the scene of the strike from its initial period through its conclusion. Zubrycki and his crew took this documentation a step further: rather than deal with the strike from its beginning to its *apparent* end, he returned to the scene several months later to capture the after effects of the event.

Zubrycki's documentary is grim in its portrayal of a community ill at ease, unsettled in the face of a major upheaval threatening their lives and their futures.

The complexities of a strike cluster around the relation of the workers to their union, to the company, to their families, to their work, to the dispute itself, and to the government and its arbitration mechanisms.

Zubrycki's undertaking is nothing short of ambitious, particularly given the time available — barely 60 minutes — and what can be covered in this span and yet remain accessible in terms of ideas and information. In a sense, Zubrycki has sidestepped the problem of too much information by simply concentrating on the point of view and experiences of the strikers and their families. This is intercut with his own footage and footage associated with the strike or the issues of the strike.

The film is appropriate for post-primary Media Studies and Social Studies classroom use. This Study Supplement is intended as a guide for both teachers and students to stimulate discussion of the film and the issues raised in it.

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SYNOPSIS

In September 1982, BHP notified 400 miners at six coal pits on the NSW South Coast of their impending retrenchment. The company's reasons for these redundancies was a downturn in domestic and international coalmarkets which made their current high production of Australian coal unprofitable.

In response to this announcement the miners at the Kemira pit, where 206 of the pit's 296 workers were threatened, decided to take militant action — not only for the sake of their livelihood, but also for what they perceived as the well-being of their industry and the well-being of their community, Wollongong. In October 1982 they began a stay-in strike: 31 miners occupied the mine, living for 16 days five kilometres underground.

The 31 Kemira miners staging the sit-in were supported above-ground by the workmates who alerted the city of Wollongong to the plight of the miners and the repercussions for the city. The Women's Auxiliary played an important role in the strike, taking care of domestic matters, supplying food and lending moral and physical strength to the cause.

The Miners' Federation and other mining unions took BHP to arbitration before the Coal Tribunal, arguing for a moratorium on the sackings pending a proper inquiry. The company protested, arguing that they hadn't broken any award agreements.

The strike dragged on. On Tuesday, October 26, 1982, over a thousand Wollongong mine and steel workers chartered two special trains to Canberra. Their aim was to dramatically confront Prime Minister Fraser with the issues of the strike. Angered by the lack of response from the government, the men smashed through the glass doors of Parliament House — the first time in history that this has been done.

Later, the Coal Tribunal chairman recommended an extension of the men's jobs for two weeks. This was seen by the miners and their union as a victory signal and the men came out of the mine jubilantly. They then staged a victory march through Wollongong. The celebration, however, was short-lived, as it rapidly became apparent that the two week extension was just that: at the end of the two weeks the miners would be redundant. The Tribunal then announced it would not rule on the issues the union was pressing.

In effect, the company won, the miners lost. This is the end of the strike, but not of the lives of the strikers. The film makers insist that we witness and understand the continuing damage to the human lives involved in the strike.

PRODUCTION

Filming began six days into the Kemira pit strike; director Tom Zubrycki was contacted and appealed to as an independent film maker to cover the dispute. Zubrycki had just completed his award winning documentary, *WATERLOO*, the story of the struggle of inner-city Sydney residents against a devastating urban renewal project.

Zubrycki is a sociologist turned film maker who learned the film making process by shooting and editing video on the streets. With this background he was an obvious choice to document the workers' struggle in Wollongong: "On my part it was a very spontaneous decision," he said, "a hunch that we were about to film some important moments of labour history."

Zubrycki gathered as crew for the project, Fabio Cavadini (cinematographer) and Russ Hermann (sound recordist). They had just completed a project on the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane. Zubrycki had only \$3,000 (of his own money) to start the Kemira film, both Cavadini and Hermann were prepared to work for deferred wages. Later the trio was complemented by composer Elizabeth Drake who scored a musical soundtrack for the film. Drake insisted on going underground to get a feel for the miners working conditions, which is effectively reflected in her score.

At the same time Zubrycki needed finance to keep the project afloat. While various requests for finance were turned down, other film makers donated old film stock to the project. Support also came from within the union movement.

In an effort to keep costs down, Zubrycki did not have film processed daily. (Daily 'rushes' are usual, providing the film maker with a guide to what they have shot and how they might continue with shooting.) Instead all his money went into the purchase of more film stock in order to shoot as much coverage of the events as possible.

After the strike was over the film makers returned to Wollongong to shoot 'pickups', re-enactment footage, and to film the aftermath of the strike — the continuing effects on the strikers, their wives and the community.

Then began the long process of post-production. Editing the film took 26 weeks over a period of 11 months.

KEMIRA — DIARY OF A STRIKE was completed in June, 1984 and the exhausting process of marketing the film was underway. It was first screened at the Trade Union Centre in Wollongong in July, 1984 and was subsequently screened at the Sydney Film Festival and the 1984 AFI Awards where it was voted Best Documentary.

THE MEDIA

The media generally fit coverage of industrial disputes into standard news story formulas unless the dispute is one which threatens to directly affect the lives of the majority of people, for example, the 1985 Victorian milk producers' blockade or the Queensland government's confrontation with state power workers. In such situations the media will look at the issue, indeed, adopt a position. In many cases, however, a strike becomes just another story. The media coverage is of an *event* rather than an *issue*. This was initially the case with the Kemira sit-in: Later, the nature of the workers' action — sitting inside the mine — added a new element, drama. Zubrycki seizes upon this dramatic potential as a means of demonstrating the relatively one-sided view of the collective media coverage.

Before dealing with that issue, it is important to consider the basic conventions applied by electronic and print media in handling such stories. In essence, this is founded upon a reporter's on-the-spot coverage of events as they happen. In electronic media a voice-over narration or newsreader may introduce the dispute's history then move to a reporter at the scene. The whole story may be 90 seconds or less of air time. With newspaper coverage, the story will lead with the latest developments then follow with background details. Newspaper coverage has the potential to be (and usually is) the most comprehensive but this is, of course, subject the space requirements and news value judgements. When selecting visuals to go with the story, both press and television will go for the newsy, action shots such as demonstrations or violence on picket lines.

Overall, we can gain a fairly limited impression of a situation. The news treatment makes all stories about strikes essentially the same — the specific, peculiar nature of a particular strike is lost in formula.

Zubrycki, as a sympathetic film maker, is the only chance the miners have for presenting their case to a wider public. He has recognized this and juxtaposed media handling of the dispute with his re-enactments of the Coal Arbitration Tribunal's findings. He mocks the Tribunal's methods, charging them with a failure to deal with fundamental human issues, a failure communicated in the Tribunal's inaccessible and mystifying language. Ultimately, the film suggests that any power workers may have (such as striking or even working with independent film makers) is effectively eroded by the mainstream media's abstract and formulaic presentation of events.

WOMEN IN KEMIRA

There are no women mineworkers in *KEMIRA*. No women occupy the mine during the strike action. But the women are vitally involved in the strike: not simply in their ability to provide the miners with food; not because they organize a support structure that seems to be more supportive and more effective than the union the men belong to, but because the Women's Auxiliary group provides the impetus and the moral support which allows the men to maintain their rage. (Interesting that in scenes of the occupation of the mine the men are seen to pursue traditional male activities — pingpong and **Playboy** pinups in a social space without women.) The strike crisis puts the women in a role of active equality with the men, directly involved as partners in the struggle at the workplace; the women, through their support, show the men that the strike's meaning is not limited to the relations of employee-employer-workplace, but rather involves all aspects of their lives — home, community, family.

The women are shown confronting the situation in several ways. Initially we see the women turning a commandeered shed at the pithead into a field kitchen. They analyze the menu in terms of logistical problems, preparing food which must be delivered to men five kilometres under the ground. We see them marching through the streets of Wollongong, raising community consciousness about strike issues. The importance of the women's function is further exemplified through interviews with specific women. In the first interview, a principal organizer collects food donated by sympathetic merchants and talks about the auxiliary's role in the strike. The second interview introduces Ngaire Wiltshire, wife of one of the 31 mine occupiers and mother of two young children. In addition to caring for her family and devoting long hours to the Women's Auxiliary, she must also work a milk round early each morning to earn extra money.

Ngaire becomes the film's heroine. We witness the change of a confused, fearful woman into a strong and determined figure. Her story is a melodrama with tragic implications; this is emphasized by the film makers' return to Wollongong after the strike has finished. The threat to the family home, which Ngaire and Tom had purchased just eight weeks before the strike, has become a reality: the home and savings are gone. The marriage has broken up. Tom has had to go to Queensland to find work; Ngaire is not prepared to uproot her family and so remains in Wollongong.

POWER

The relationship between the strikers and powers they are confronting — the government, the Coal Tribunal, the media — is shown as one of alienation. The film poses itself as the strikers' only means of sympathetic representation. This is clearly demonstrated by the film's portrayal of the media coverage. The media coverage has nothing to do with the strikers' experience; it is concerned with a process of abstraction. Only for the miners, among all the forces in the film, is the strike concrete, tangible and real. Only the miners will experience, will live through, the effects of decisions about their jobs and their strike; for the government, the company, and the media, these decisions will be a single case, one event among many similar cases dealt with every day.

For the miners, the issues are fundamental, simple. For society, the issues are neither simple nor direct. The perception of this complexity will remain cloudy to the miners — and probably the public — given that it is necessary to understand the vast number of institutional processes and mediations which make up the longstanding machinery for resolving labour-management disputes. The miners are isolated by several kinds of distance: class distance; the geographical distance of the mine from the site of decision-making; the political distance between the miners, on the one hand, and the government/BHP complex on the other hand; and the distance between the strike action at the local union level and the policy and decision-making apparatus of the national union.

KEMIRA shows, through the limits of its chosen method, the miners dealing with the government in the way they think will be most effective. They are seen storming the Houses of Parliament, dramatically breaking down the doors and then occupying the foyer, waiting in frustration for some government official to hear them.

The idea of "union" in the film is remarkably vague. The clearest presentation of "union" is as a spontaneous group strike and support action at the pit head. The further relations between this local union action and its national union structure, the Miners' Federation, is almost totally missing. Some possible interpretations of this absence in the film are: 1) the film assumes we already know the complexities of the national union's role in the strike; 2) the film does not think this relationship is important; 3) the Federation's involvement was neither 'filmable' like the stay-in and the demonstration nor quotable like the Tribunal hearings.

The basic principle of unionism is that workers join together into local, regional and national groups to consolidate their bargaining power. This brings the power of a national labour federation to bear on any local dispute, and so various sorts of industrial action may be employed to bring pressure on employers or government to force negotiation and resolution.

The absence of this in *KEMIRA* is another element in the film's depiction of the miners' alienation and isolation. What actions could the national union have taken? What actions did it take? How was this decision arrived at? What input did the Kemira miners have in this decision?



VIEWS ON REVIEWS

A look at the reviews of any film can be a useful and interesting exercise. The Australian Film Institute's Research and Information Centre holds the *KEMIRA* Press Kit which contains copies of reviews of the film. If you wish to use these reviews in a classroom activity, write to, or telephone, the A.F.I. Research and Information Centre and ask for copies of the reviews (A.F.I., 47 Little La Trobe St., Melbourne 3000, Ph. (03) 662 1944.)

Reviews are a standard feature of the press; they are a type of news story. They call attention to the arrival of products (films) in the marketplace, products which usually have a short sales life. Reviews describe the film (and no two descriptions will be identical) and they provide a consumer guide.

Reviews of certain types of films may also follow a more specific process of formularizing. In the case of labour dispute documentaries, films which are almost always in sympathy with the workers, sympathetic reviewers often generalize the specific strike in question. They fit it into an unchanging, repeated story, a fairy-tale of the left which often has an unhappy ending.

Like good fairy-tales, this formula story evokes strong, fundamental emotions based on good and evil, fair and opportunist, but such reviewing runs the risk of such storytelling, the risk of simplification. In making each strike film into another instance of the general story of all strike films, such writing moves away from the specifics of each strike. In so doing, a strong emotional effect, and a right one, is achieved; but a harder task ignored. This task is the analysis of each strike and each strike film on its own terms — a search for the particular knowledge in each; ideally a cumulative search in which knowledge is built upon.

In the case of *KEMIRA — DIARY OF A STRIKE*, many reviewers construct a second, parallel story: the story of the making of the film and the man who made it. Much attention is given to the obstacles faced in the making of the film and the dedication of the film makers in seeing it through. Director Tom Zubrycki is singled out in such reviews to stand for all members of the film crew. Zubrycki's is a sound position. As an academic turned documentary film maker, he focuses on the human cost of industrial strife.

Press accounts of the film detail Zubrycki's quick action from the beginning of the strike, marshalling scanty available funds and equipment, organizing a volunteer crew, living with the strike and strikers during the event, and following on with months

of dogged post-production and frustrating sales efforts in order to bring *KEMIRA — DIARY OF A STRIKE* to the screen.

So reviews of the film contain two stories: the story of the strike, and the story of the film making. Why does this structure frequently occur? Because in telling the first story, the story of the reviews arouse passions, but must suffer an unhappy ending. In wrapping the story of the film making around the first story, parallel emotions are evoked, but the failure of heroic action in the first story (the strike) is balanced by the success of heroic action in the second (making the film).

References: For a close analysis of the role of the press in political struggle, see Godard and Gorin's *LETTER TO JANE*. For further insight into an industrial event similar to the *Kemira* strike portrayed also in terms of the effects on individual strikes, see Peter Green's film *WE BUILT SOME GREAT SHIPS*, documenting the effects on the lives of three retrenched workers at the closing of BHP's Whyalla shipyards (1980). For a strike diary film which shows the workers exercising other responses to their problems, see *HARLAN COUNTY U.S.A.* or *STRIKEBOUND*.

Activity: Examine the use of still photos which accompany your copies of the reviews of *KEMIRA* (particularly John Hughes' interview with Zubrycki in *Filmnews*, October, 1984). Compare the visual content of the photos with the material developed in the various reviews — consider them as an independent photo essay; then analyze the meaning developed when the photos are considered in terms of the captions supplied for them.

Reviews: Students may be asked to analyze given reviews and/or compare various reviews. They might write their own reviews and later relate them to press reviews.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE, we suggest you run, don't walk, to your library or the A.T.O.M. offices for a copy of the *STRIKEBOUND* Study Guide. In addition to addressing filmic components, including important sections on sound and music, visual imagery, and other production elements, the guide also offers an important analysis of film and politics by John Davies, a study of the 1949 coal strike by Peter James, and a comprehensive resource guide which lists and discusses Australian (and other) films dealing with unionism, mining, and unemployment researched by Ken Berryman. Available for \$3.50 from A.T.O.M., PO. Box 222, Carlton South 3053.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

Carefully examine the storming of Parliament House sequence. What is the role of the camera in this event? Where is the camera located? Is this the usual camera coverage for such events?

★ ★ ★

What is the difference between a public event and a media event? In your experience, describe the effect a TV camera has in a public place.

★ ★ ★

Look closely at the scene in which the miners meet after the strike is over. Consider the language used by the miners' spokesperson. Does he, and do other characters in other parts of the film, give the camera a privileged position?

★ ★ ★

What can the miners and their families do for themselves? What else might they have done that they did not do?

The film is about a strike, but that means it's about the relation of workers to the powers that control large parts of their lives. Who does a job belong to: the worker, who invests his time and labour? The union, which in representing the workers will make many decisions controlling the nature of the job? The company, which pays for time, labour, equipment, and material?

★ ★ ★

What is the purpose of a film like *KEMIRA*? What should it do? How should it do those things?

★ ★ ★

Discuss the implications of *KEMIRA* being screened on national television, two years after the strike is over.

★ ★ ★

Divide the class into three groups, one large, two small. The teacher represents management. One of the smaller groups of students represents an independent arbitration tribunal. The large group represents the workers. The workers organise a strike. The third group of students act as media, in any form, from reporters to film makers. Have each group plan their roles, then begin the process of a labour management dispute. At the end of each phase have the class discuss the effectiveness of the steps taken, and other possible ways of proceeding. Later have each student write about what they have learned.