
# WOMEN IN THE MINERS' STRIKE 1984–5

An essay to accompany the special exhibition at the National Coal Mining Museum for England, 29 February 2020 to 3 January 2021

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To find out more and visit the online exhibition, go to **www.ucl.ac.uk/women-miners-strike**




# Contents


| | |
|---|---|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Early Days | 2-3 |
| Feeding and Fundraising | 5-8 |
| Making Ends Meet | 10-12 |
| Marches, Rallies and Pickets | 16-17 |
| Divided Communities | 20-21 |
| Legacies | 22-24 |
| Studies of Women in the Strike | 25-28 |
| Further Reading | 28-29 |
| Endnotes | 30-31 |


Cover image: Maerdy Women's Support Group, South Wales. Copyright Martin Shakeshaft

*"I didn't think much of it to start with. No – I really, whether I buried my head in the sand, or whatever, because I was so busy trying to bring up two kids – I had two kids at this time, and being pregnant, and spewing up everywhere, I wasn't – my head wasn't – wasn't there …"*

*– Anne Kirby, Fife*

# Introduction

The miners' strike began on 6 March 1984 and ended on 3 March 1985. It was the iconic conflict of the Thatcher decade, pitting the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) against Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in a struggle for the future of Britain.

Since the 1842 Mines and Collieries Act had made it illegal for women to work underground in Britain's mines, this was a strike mainly of men – though some women who worked as cooks, cleaners or administrative staff came out on strike too. Histories of the strike, unsurprisingly, have often been written from the perspective of men, but women's actions were just as important in this year of conflict and struggle.

Where women's experiences have been documented, the focus has usually been on activist women who set up support groups, ran soup kitchens, and stood on picket lines. However, it was not just activist women who made history. The decisions of women who supported the strike within the home and family – and those women who opposed the strike, quietly or vocally – were also profoundly important to the outcome.

From 2014 to 2019, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Natalie Thomlinson and Victoria Dawson interviewed over 100 women from coalfield communities from Kent to Fife, South Yorkshire to South Wales, about their experiences in the miners' strike. Our interviewees told stories of joy and sorrow, anger and despair, losses but also gains.

Many women who got involved in activism remembered happy moments – the experience of solidarity, and of fighting for a cause they believed in could be profoundly rewarding. But all women had dark moments, too. Those women who were living outside mining communities often felt much more isolated, and many struggled even more during the strike because of this.

Women's activism – the astonishing organisation which created a network of soup kitchens and food parcel distribution centres that, at the height of the dispute, fed over 140,000 miners and their families – was vital to keeping the strike going.[1]

But so was women's paid labour outside the home, and women's emotional labour within the home, bolstering morale when it faltered. This side of women's struggle should also be central to the historical record.

Women gained new experiences because of the strike – some through activism, some through taking on new work outside the home – and in many cases they grew in confidence because of this. Some also met feminists from the Women's Liberation Movement, many of whom got involved in supporting the strike. Few miners' wives became paid-up members of the Women's Liberation Movement during the strike, but many did feel their lives had been changed because they were caught up in this extraordinary struggle.

For those women whose husbands or fathers worked through the strike, or returned to work before the end of the strike – or for those women who themselves worked through the strike in the coal industry – remembering this year was difficult. "Robyn", for example, worked in a clerical role for the Coal Board, and decided to keep working through the strike. She still felt, 35 years later, that 'I can't articulate my view, because I have very few people that have my ... experience of it, so it's not valid.'[2]

These interviews demonstrate the sheer variety and diversity of women's experiences in the strike. The exhibition at the National Coal Mining Museum for England and this accompanying essay demonstrate, above all, the incredible stories that so many women from coalfield communities have to tell about their lives.

## Early Days

Some women saw the strike coming, while for others it was a complete shock. A few were immediately determined to support the strike, but for others – perhaps the majority – the dominant emotions were anxiety and fear. And while more politically-aware women sometimes suspected that the strike would be a long one, many other women hoped, in the early days of the strike, that it would all be over soon.

Many women were frightened when the strike was announced, unsure what it would mean for them. Diane's husband worked at Denby Grange Pit, near Wakefield, in West Yorkshire; when her husband came home and broke the news, she recalled, 'my feelings were mixed. Frightened, angry at how we were going to manage, I felt alone, I had no-one to turn to.'[3] Anger was a common emotion. Maureen, from Lothian Women's Support Group, remembered that she was 'fuming' when the strike began: their family was just getting over a recent eight-week strike at Monktonhall pit in 1983. She felt they simply could not afford to come out again.[4]

Some women thought – or at least hoped – that it would probably all be over quite quickly. Kay Case and her husband were both working at Deep Navigation colliery at the start of the strike: he was a miner, and she worked in the canteen. When the Yorkshire pits came out, Kay heard about it, but hoped things would be sorted out before the strike spread any further. Soon, however, there was a ballot, and Deep Navigation voted to come out in support of the Yorkshire miners. Kay was a member of COSA (the Colliery Officials and Staffs Area), which represented administrative workers as well as canteen staff, and at first they were not called out, so Kay was still going into work, though when the NUM picketed the pit, she would not cross the picket line. Eventually, COSA called their workers out, too, and now both Kay and her husband were on strike.[5] She still thought, though, that it would be a couple of weeks – maybe months at most – and that they would be back at work by the time the summer holidays began. Their son had just started an apprenticeship as a safety engineer – he was going to work in the pits, too – and their daughter was still at school.

In Kent, Sue had been hearing about the possibility of a strike from her husband, who was deeply involved in the NUM. However, just because she suspected something was coming did not mean that there seemed to be a role for her in the strike. On the day that her husband's pit voted to come out on strike in support of the Yorkshire miners, Sue heard a knock on the door, and, she recalled, 'in come these four, five men'. They were looking for her husband: the militants were on the move. They piled into the living room and Sue followed them, but, she recalled, they didn't want her there:

> "Scuse me, could you leave!"
> "Pardon?"
> "Could you leave?"
> "Yes, ok!"

When the men emerged, they had decided to drive up to Yorkshire and soon they were all piling into cars.[6] As yet, there was no role for Sue in the strike other than looking after the home and family; later on, however, she would become deeply involved in her local support group, as would Kay Case.

In some parts of the coalfields, there were women who suspected that the strike would be a long one, and who wanted to play a part. From just a day or two into the strike, they began to get women together to talk about how they could mobilise to support the miners. In Aylesham, in Kent, there were recent precedents for women from mining communities mobilising in this way – just a decade previously, in the famous miners' strike of 1974 – which brought down Ted Heath's Conservative government – women had organised as Aylesham Ladies Action Group. When the strike began in 1984 some of the women who had been involved in the 1970s got together and called a meeting.

Kay Sutcliffe was one of the leaders of the support movement in Kent. She recalled that 'at that first meeting, we thought we were only gonna have about twelve people, there was about fifty women turned up.'[7] Many women were annoyed because they had watched a TV programme where a woman from Nottinghamshire opposed to the strike debated a supporter of the strike from Doncaster. They wanted to show that the women of the Kent coalfield were not urging their husbands back to work. At first, the women planned to collect blankets for pickets standing out in the pre-dawn cold waiting for shifts to change. Soon they decided, though, to organise women to go on a rally to an area not on strike. The NUM provided them with a bus and despatched them to Coalville, in Leicester. A BBC reporter came with them on the bus and soon they, too, were on the news.

In South Yorkshire, a small group of women who worked with or had links to Arthur Scargill and the NUM had been thinking about what they could do in a strike for some time before its outbreak. They were convinced that in a long strike, women would be key to both practical organisation and morale. Jean McCrindle, a lecturer at the adult education institution Northern College, in Barnsley, and a well-known left-wing activist of many decades' standing, had been trying to convince Scargill of this fact for some time.[8]

In Barnsley, a group of women met just a few days into the strike to discuss how they could support it. They sent a letter to the *Barnsley Chronicle* setting out their case:

> We, as women, would like to express our support for the strike action and to highlight some of the issues involved. If pits are closed on grounds other than exhaustion, then the employment prospects for local people will be bleak indeed. Any jobs that go now mean that our youngsters will face only the dole-queue in the future ...
>
> We realise that miners and their families will endure hardships during the strike and that no-one relishes the prospect of mounting bills. However, those same sacrifices were made by our forefathers who gave their lives to the industry and struggled to protect jobs and improve conditions. Let us take their example and stand firmly together to ensure the future of our community.
>
> Finally, we wish to object to the assumption made in some sections of the popular press that all miners' wives oppose the decision to strike. We suspect that the vast majority of miners' families realise that the only other alternative is to bury our heads in the sand and hope that our pit won't be next.[9]

On 18 March they held their first open meeting, which was attended by over 100 women. The group became a hub for groups in villages all around Barnsley, and Jean McCrindle was elected as treasurer.

In Nottinghamshire, however, the story was rather different for many miners' wives. Here, many miners felt angry that they were being called out on strike by miners from other coalfields with no national ballot, and a majority decided to keep working. "Polly" lived with her second husband and children in a pit village in Nottinghamshire where most of the miners had no intention of going on strike. Polly, like her husband, felt intensely angry that Yorkshire miners were attempting to picket out the Nottinghamshire miners without a national ballot. She remembered driving through 'gangs of men' in her car, shouting at them 'how dare you come down here!' Most men carried on working, bussed in each day. Elsewhere a sense of community was vital to bringing men out on strike and to keeping families solid behind the strike; but here, Polly recalled, the community worked in the opposite way, to keep men working. Anyone who went on strike, she thought, would have been 'hounded': 'you're dealing with a group of – you're dealing with a community.' [10]

*"We wish to object to the assumption made in some sections of the popular press that all miners' wives oppose the decision to strike"*
*– Barnsley miners' wives in the* Barnsley Chronicle, *March 1984*

Image right: Marilyn Johnson, Strike Kitchen at the Colliery Club, Easington, Co. Durham, August 1984.

## Feeding and Fundraising

Food was central to the women's support movement, which ran soup kitchens, distributed food parcels and food vouchers, and raised money to fund their activities. Some women started to set up groups to organise food provision and fundraise from just a few days or weeks into the strike. The groups often had informal beginnings, but as time went on, they chose chairwomen, secretaries and treasurers and opened bank accounts. They worked with the NUM to get lists of miners to distribute food parcels to, collected money and ran fundraisers. Women started travelling and giving speeches at rallies and political meetings in order to raise funds.

Soup kitchens usually worked better in areas like pit villages, where there was a high concentration of mining families who could get there every day. In places where mining families were more dispersed, and travelling to a central point each day might be more difficult – for example, in the South Wales Valleys – groups tended to focus on distributing food parcels on a weekly basis.

In general, women's support groups took on the bulk of the work of feeding and organising food. However, this was not always the case. In a few places, it was *men* who ran soup kitchens.

In Cowdenbeath, Fife, as Anne Kirby recalled, men initially ran the soup kitchen, but over time, the women's group took it over.[11] In Cowie, in Stirling, a strike centre opened three weeks into the strike; four men worked permanently in the kitchen – only one had previous mass catering experience – and a rota was eventually set up so that other men could help with the cleaning and washing up. Though a women's committee was set up, it had little success in drumming up support; the women involved were not sure why, when in other areas women's groups were going from success to success.[12]

Women's support groups were usually autonomous from the NUM, which was busy organising flying pickets all around Great Britain, but they always worked with the NUM on a more or less close basis. This, however, was not always straightforward. While some NUM branches quickly recognised how useful women's support would be, others assumed that the strike was a matter for the men. Pat Smith, from Dinnington, South Yorkshire, found that many of the men in the local NUM branch did not want to admit women to their meeting to discuss a women's support group with them. Pat's husband, who was president of the branch, and who supported her plans, suggested that she and other women picket the branch meeting in order to force the unwilling men to listen.[13] The women did so, and the two groups later forged a working relationship.

Women's fundraising activities took a host of different forms. They asked local businesses for donations, and went door-to-door asking the local community for tins and other long-lasting food. They received donations from other trade unions and local trades councils. London was a good source of donations, and some women travelled to London, where they could collect on the street, or give speeches at fundraising meetings organised by groups like trade unions or Constituency Labour Parties. Constituency Labour Parties and other groups like Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners "twinned" with mining support groups in particular areas in order to provide ongoing support and donations.[15] Women ran fundraising events like jumble sales and discos, and created their own posters and flyers to publicise their cause. When winter came, some groups got hold of chainsaws and went logging, distributing free fuel to strikers and pensioners, and selling the rest to raise funds.

| | Single person | Families |
|---|---|---|
| Potatoes | 3 | 8 |
| Carrots | 3 | 6 |
| Peas | 1 tin | 1 tin |
| Meat | 1 tin | 1 tin |
| Bread | Half a loaf | 1 loaf |
| Baked beans | 1 tin | 1 tin |
| Cereals | Half packet wheatbix | 1 packet |
| | Orange or apple | Orange or apple |

Table above: Contents of a food parcel in the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valleys area of South Wales.[14]

Image right: Badges and posters from the Sprotbrough and Brodsworth Mining Families' Support Group, in Doncaster, from the Maureen Coates papers


MINING FAMILIES SUPPORT GROUP
MINERS FIGHT IS YOUR FIGHT
WE'LL MEET AGAIN
NATIONAL UNION OF MINEWORKERS
DIG DEEP FOR THE Miners
SUSANNAH YORK, JILL GASCOINE, MAGGIE STEED AND BILL OWEN
IN BETTER TIMES -
WE HOPE
MEAN'WHILE....
WE'RE SUPPORTING THE
MINERS AND THEIR FAMILIES
BOTH
PRACTICALLY + FINANCIALL
I never scabbed
1984-85 Strike

Being part of a women's support group was often immensely hard work. Some women had jobs; most had households and children to take care of, as well. But there was a positive side to the labour involved: for many women, being involved in the support movement gave them a social network and emotional support. Anne Kirby, in Cowdenbeath, found herself on her own at home while her husband, who was on the NUM committee, was out all day at the strike centre:

> I felt isolated from it, and I thought to myself one day, I thought, you know what, you – it's up to you, you've got to do something – so I just put the kids in the pram, and walked down to see what it was all about.[16]

Getting involved meant Anne had something to do, and felt part of things, rather than being isolated at home. Women who lived in pit villages or in towns with a high concentration of miners found it much easier to get to strike centres and support group meetings, and therefore found it easier to get involved in the women's movement. Those who lived at a distance were more likely to miss out on the camaraderie and the morale boost that could come from activism.

There was, for some, a less pleasant side to the experience of being part of a support group, however: rumours and gossip spread in some places about support group activists and NUM officials supposedly creaming off the best of the food donated to the miners. Stories like this were, of course, painful and offensive to the women involved in support groups. In Betteshanger, in Kent, Liz French remembered 'so many rows over food parcels'. She confronted a miner's wife who had rejected her food parcel one day: 'she went, yeah, they've got more, them that work in there, I've seen them going out there with three carrier bagfuls.' Liz explained that the support group members were probably taking extra parcels to families who could not come to the centre to collect theirs. Liz gave this woman a piece of her mind:

> If you choose to sit in your fricking house both of yer, moan and fricking groan about us, who are flogging ourselves to death, I said, carry on, I said, but if you ever come in and do that again, I said, you'll get nothing.[17]

But when she got back to the strike centre, the other women told Liz off: they did not want anyone to have an excuse to go back to work early.

In some other families, there was a reluctance to even contemplate the idea of coming to a soup kitchen or accepting a food parcel. For some, the idea of soup kitchens had inescapable echoes of the depression, the "hungry '30s", the means test and the degrading treatment of those forced to rely on handouts to eat. Mary Hole's husband Den, a striking phurnacite plant worker in Aberdare, South Wales, did not want to go to the hall to collect a food parcel for his family, and only went once, right at the end of the strike.[18]

*"I remember the man who came to ask for a food parcel when it was not his turn, I saw tears in his eyes and I knew it must have taken courage for him to ask and that his family must be in great difficulty. I immediately gave him a parcel and I do not think I have ever seen anyone so happy when being given so little"*

*– Heather Wood, activist in Save Easington Area Mines*[19]

## Making Ends Meet

The work of women's support groups to provide soup kitchens and food parcels was vital to keeping the strike going, but this was not the only form of women's work that was important to the survival of families and communities. The paid labour of miners' wives – and of their daughters, sisters and mothers – was also key. This has often not been a central part of the story of women's experiences in the strike, but its significance should be recognised.

After 1945, it was increasingly common for women to go out to work even after they married and had children. Miners' wives were no different, and like other working-class women, they tended to prefer part-time jobs, and many only went back to work after their children had started school. One sociological study of West Yorkshire mining communities just before the strike found that forty-seven per cent of women had paid employment.[20] Miners' wives worked in factories, in catering, in administration, in social care, as nurses, in agriculture (mainly in Kent), and in a whole host of other jobs. And this paid employment became immensely important in the strike. In Sheffield, Carole Hancock's job as a home help meant the family managed, 'by sheer going without',[21] to avoid getting into debt during the strike – though they had to cut out all luxuries and buy only the cheapest food.

Some women took on extra work during the strike. Linda Chapman, from Washington, Tyne and Wear, was working two days a week as a personnel officer when the strike broke out. Her husband was an engineer in the pits, and their son, Daniel, was 14 months old. She decided to apply for a full-time job in order to keep the family afloat. Her testimony highlights how deeply this affected her:

> I worked in Newcastle, and we lived in Washington; by the time I got home, he (Daniel) was like, bathed, ready for bed, I'd get a little cuddle, I'd sit and cry, what am I missing out on ... I was just, like, devastated.[22]

Many women, like Linda, sacrificed time with their families to take on extra paid work during the strike. But there was another side to Linda's story, too, because taking this new job made Linda realise: 'I'm enjoying this, I like work, and I'm really getting into work, I can, you know, see how I could progress my career.'

For many women, going out to work in the strike gave them a new sense of confidence and possibility. In South Wales, "Pippa Morgan" took on three jobs during the miners' strike in order to provide for her family – doing homecare, working in a supermarket, and as an Avon rep. She had married young and had her son before she was 20; she had done little work outside the home before, and taking on all this work while her husband was on strike led to a reversal in their roles. He became the main carer for their son, and started to have dinner ready for her when she got home. Pippa said that she found this 'really empowering'. Her horizons were opening up, and the women she met at work encouraged her to see that 'there's a big world out there'. Married, with a son and a mortgage, still in her early twenties, Pippa realised she had not had much of a chance to see it. Looking back, she thought that the new experiences she gained during the strike by going out to work were 'the beginning of the end of my marriage, really', and several years later, she divorced her husband and struck out on her own.[23]

After the strike, Tony Parker conducted an oral history project in a mining community he called "Red Hill". One of the women he spoke to was Pauline Street, aged thirty, married with four children, who took on a part-time job during the strike to support the family, as well as getting involved in her local women's support group. Pauline told him:

> Alf stayed at home and looked after the children, so we'd sort of changed round: he did the housework, the dishes and the hoovering and the rest of it, and I brought

> home the money ... The first week or so was all right, and I used to get home about two o'clock. As soon as I did, he was on the couch there with his feet up, reading the paper. After a bit I said to him one day "I didn't do that when you used to come home after work, Alf" ... doing the house was my job when he was working, so why shouldn't it be his job when I was working? ... We had quite a bit of a row about it. Anyway in the end he saw it and agreed: and after that we used to make a joke about it, when I came home he used to be waiting for me with an apron on. I wouldn't risk letting him go so far as trying to bake a cake, but he was very good.[24]

Gender roles clearly changed in Pauline's household during the strike, but interestingly, she emphasised that while she was happy that her husband started taking on his fair share of the housework, there was still something comical about seeing a man in an apron – and baking cakes was still her role.

Not everyone's husband was like Pippa's or Pauline's, though. Maggie Stubbs was married to a miner in Maltby, South Yorkshire, during the strike. She continued to work as a nurse and brought in a wage throughout the strike, but when asked if her husband took on more chores around the home when he was on strike, Maggie said, 'No! What kind of a silly question are you asking me? No, he never do things like that, it doesn't change the culture. The wives, they had to do it.'[25]

Women's work outside the home was hugely important in the strike. It kept many families going. However, there were huge variations in women's experiences. Some women found they gained a lot from the new work they took on during the strike. But they could also feel devastated at the time they could not spend with their children because of their work. Some women found that their husbands took on new roles in the home during the strike – but others found they were now taking on responsibility for both paid work and home.

Miners' wives' wages were, in many families, key to keeping the strike going, but other family members also offered their support. Margaret Whitaker was teaching at Barnsley College when the strike broke out. The college gave her all the teaching they could find over the course of the year. Her husband was getting just £2 petrol money a day when he went picketing. On the day the strike was announced, their two children came to Margaret to offer her the money from their money boxes – a gesture that Margaret remembered as lovely, but also tinged with sadness. Over the course of the strike, many family members chipped in with support of different sorts: Margaret's mother paid for a school trip for her daughter, and a holiday for Margaret, her husband and son. Her niece bought Christmas presents for the children, even though she did not have much herself.[26]

Striking families took any and every opportunity they could to save money. As Joyce Boyes, from Selby, put it, they had to 'cut their cloth'. Joyce and her husband used up their savings; their car insurance ran out and they could not afford to renew it, so they cycled around. They had to cancel a holiday to Spain, and lost their deposit. Joyce got a job at the local pub, and took on some cleaning work. At the pub where she worked, all the staff got a sandwich at lunch, and Joyce's boss gave her any left-over food after lunch. But even with her work, they had little money for food, let alone coal to heat the house. Her mother and sister sometimes helped out by giving them things, and her father sometimes brought them some wood. But it was not enough to heat the house properly, so they kept to one room, put extra clothes on, and got into bed early with a hot water bottle. Joyce remembered that being cold was 'probably one of the most miserable things'.[27]

In many families, husbands and sons went coal picking, or 'riddling', to get fuel – many miners' homes were heated by coal fires or coal-fired boilers. They burned old shoes, furniture or fences. Pat Smith, from Dinnington, South Yorkshire, also recalled turning back to lessons from her grandmother from the war, like making balls of string by cutting up old pairs of tights.[28] Mandy Slater and her husband had a smallholding in Barnsley, with pigs, geese, chickens, and goats, and used to get stale bread from a local bakery to feed to the pigs.[29] In Abercynon, South Wales, Tanya Dower's father made his own wine, and swapped it with a neighbour who grew his own vegetables.[30]

It was not only family members who gave to striking families in need. Friends and work colleagues sometimes helped out, too. In some cases, businesses donated to loyal customers who were on strike. In Aberdare, South Wales, Mary Hole remembered her husband, Den:

> he was passing the butchers ... and the chap inside who was running it, he stopped him, he waved by hand, called him in ... and he got a box, and he'd put tins in there, and I think he'd given some meat, and ... he was quite adamant for him to have it, because he knew he was such a good customer, always going there, so that was it.[31]

Striking miners' wives and families got food, fuel, and money from wherever they could.

There were also forms of assistance available to striking miners' families from the state. However, these were often difficult to claim. Striking miners' families famously had notional "strike pay" docked from any social security benefits they claimed – even though the NUM was not, in fact, able to offer strike pay. Many women found that Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) officials were unhelpful, or even hostile, to the families of striking miners. Women's support groups and other organisations like the Citizens' Advice Bureau gave advice to striking miners and their families about what benefits they were entitled to and how to claim them, as well as how to claim tax rebates for working wives whose husbands were striking.

Some local authorities did what they could to help the strikers' families. Some, for example, froze rents for council tenants, and opened school canteens during the school holidays so that the children of striking miners could have a hot meal every day. Others had little sympathy with strikers and their families. Sometimes help came with strings attached that were not made clear up front. Several women in Scotland remembered being offered 'food lines' to use in local shops during the strike. Alison Anderson, from Fife, remembered her relief when she was offered a £20 food line to use in the Co-op each week: but after the strike, she and other women were shocked to receive letters telling them that they had to pay all the money back.[32]

Given the harsh treatment of striking miners' families by the state, it was not surprising that women started protesting against their treatment. On June 1, sixty Kent wives staged a sit-in at the DHSS offices in Dover to protest about their treatment by officials.[33] Similar protests of women and children outside the Welsh Office were organised by Kim Howells (who later became an MP) through the Welsh NUM. The women held powerful signs recalling Margaret Thatcher's nickname – given to her by the press in the early 1970s when, as Secretary of State for Education, she removed free school milk from children over the age of seven – 'Milk Snatcher'.

Image right: Citizens' Advice Bureau advice to striking miners' families about claiming underpaid benefits. From the Maureen Coates papers

# STRIKERS WIVES UNDERPAID BENEFITS

Citizens Advice Bureau

IMPORTANT: FOR THE ATTENTION OF ALL STRIKERS WIVES.

If you are (or have been) claiming any of the following.....

| | For Yourself | | For Your Husband. |
|---|---|---|---|
| UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT ..... you should be getting ..... | 28.45 | PLUS | 17.55 |
| MATERNITY ALLOWANCE..... " " " " ..... | 27.25 | PLUS | 16.80 |
| SICKNESS BENEFIT..... " " " " ..... | 27.25 | PLUS | 16.80 |
| INVALIDITY PENSION..... " " " " ..... | 34.25 | PLUS | 20.55 |

You (the claimant) should be receiving your own benefit plus an addition for an adult dependant (i.e, husband) because he has no income.

The regulations DO NOT DISQUALIFY payment of these additions for husbands who are on strike.

If you are not getting the full amount go to your Employment Benefit Office (if you are unemployed) or to DHSS (if you are sick or receiving Maternity Allowance).

Many wives have been told that they are not entitled to claim for their husbands who are on strike. THIS IS INCORRECT.

If you have been told that you cannot claim then put your complaint in writing to the manager (quote your national insurance no:) and BE SURE TO ASK FOR THE INCREASE TO BE BACKDATED from the beginning of your claim (one woman in Cannock has received £528 in backdated arrears;).

PLEASE NOTE: THIS APPLIES TO ALL WIVES WHO HAVE HAD ANY OF THE ABOVE BENEFITS DURING THE STRIKE SO, EVEN IF YOU ARE NO LONGER GETTING THESE BENEFITS, YOU ARE STILL ENTITLED TO BE PAID ARREARS FOR THE AMOUNT THAT YOU HAVE BEEN UNDERPAID.

Citizens Advice Bureau

Published by Walsall Citizens Advice Bureau. Walsall 611331


Image above: Women demonstrating outside the Welsh Office. Image copyright Martin Shakeshaft

*"I always think about this – the day the strike was announced, Jill and Mark brought their money boxes to us ... they said, mum you can have our money if daddy's not working"*

*– Margaret Whitaker, Barnsley*

## Marches, Rallies and Pickets

Some women who became involved in supporting the strike wanted to go beyond doing soup kitchen, fund-raising and food parcel work in their communities. Many women in the support movement also went on marches and rallies in support of the strike. There were many of these, some of which were remembered as being like 'gala days'. Some marches were women-only: perhaps the most well-known of these was the Barnsley rally that took place in May 1984, when over 10,000 women from coalfield communities across the country came together to march through Barnsley town centre to gather for a rally in support of the strike in Barnsley town hall. The hall was packed with woman, the noise deafening. Many remembered it as an overwhelming moment when they realised how many other women there were who supported the cause.[34] Janet Slater, from Nottinghamshire, remembered the 'feeling of pride' she had from being there with other people who felt the same way.[35]

The Barnsley rally was particularly important because it encouraged some of the women involved in the growing support movement to decide to try to link up groups around the country into a formal network, National Women Against Pit Closures. This national group subsequently became significant in fundraising, networking, and distributing donations. It also organised another huge women's march in London in August 1984, when the women's support movement marched through the streets, and presented a petition to the queen at Buckingham Palace.[36]

Marches and rallies in Britain's cities were often key fundraising opportunities, particularly because cities such as London tended to be more affluent than coalfield areas, which were, of course, suffering from the effects of so many people being on strike. Pat Smith, from Dinnington, South Yorkshire, remembered the difficulties some women had in travelling to attend marches, rallies and other fundraising events, however. She recalled the men in her area saying to her 'you need to go to London, you need to go to London', to which she replied 'easier said than done, we've got kids. You go to London!' In the end, her support group raised money to fund local miners' trips to London,[37] which is suggestive of the limitations placed on some women's activism.

Jessica Gibson, from Gilmerton near Edinburgh, remembered attending marches in Glasgow to support the miners (her father and brothers were striking miners at Monktonhall and Bilston Glen pits), remembering that the atmosphere was 'electric', as those gathered had a shared purpose: 'to keep people in work; to keep communities together'.[38] As this suggests, marches and rallies could be vital for morale, helping to both publicise the cause of the strike, and to keep spirits up.

Some women took a prominent role in leading these sorts of rallies, becoming involved in public speaking for the first time. Several of our interviewees remembered what an intimidating experience this could be, especially when it was in front of large crowds. It was often the first speech that was the scariest. Janie Robertson, from Stirling, remembered addressing a large crowd in the local football stadium in the September of the strike, looking out at everyone and thinking 'oh my god, what am I doing?'[39] But like many women, she quickly got used to doing this. Speaking in public could be an empowering experience for some women, and helped to build confidence; a few women even went abroad to raise money for the cause.

A minority of women became involved in the most visible and perhaps most controversial of all activities associated with supporting the strike: picketing. The picket lines, where striking miners attempted to prevent anyone entering the colliery gates to go to work, provided some of the most enduring images of the strike. There was sometimes violence between the massed ranks

of policemen and those on the picket lines, and it was this violence which made the pickets such a controversial place for women to be. Aggie Currie regularly went on demonstrations and pickets, getting arrested fourteen times over the course of the strike. She remembered going on a march in Rossington, near Doncaster:

> I remember somebody chucking a brick through somebody's window. Must have been a scab's house. And I thought, 'a babby could have been laid in there!' So I went crazy. I said 'how do you know there wasn't a baby there or an old person there? How do you know?'[40]

Other picket lines, however, were relatively peaceful spaces. Anne Kirby, from Fife, remembered going picketing even when heavily pregnant; while she said that the pickets sometimes became violent, on the whole the ones in Fife were relatively peaceful, which she attributed to the fact that the police were local and 'probably all drank in the same pub' as the miners.[42]

Sometimes, even when picket lines were dangerous, there was the potential for humour. Sian James, a prominent activist in the strike who went on to become MP for Swansea East, remembered getting arrested on the picket line near her home in South Wales and giving her name as 'Mavis Riley' and her address as '15 Coronation Street, Weatherfield' (the policeman let her go without charge)![43]

Many men were worried about their wives, sisters and daughters going on the picket lines, believing they would get injured. As Jessica Gibson remembered, understandably many men were simply too 'frightened' to want their female relatives to go.[44] For others, the presence of women on the picket lines represented a symbolic incursion into a traditionally male space, which challenged gender relationships in uncomfortable ways. Maureen Coates, from Doncaster, laughed when we asked her whether she had ever gone on a picket line, telling us that 'I weren't that much of a feminist!'[45] But even when women did not go on picket lines, they still often protested in other ways – Jessica Gibson remembered women shouting abuse at police even when they did not go on picket lines.

Marches, rallies and pickets were the public face of the strike. This was where women's involvement in the strike became most obvious to the world. More than anything, it was this side of the strike that marked out a new form of participation of women from coalfield communities in the traditional, male world of NUM politics. But women's participation in picket lines was particularly controversial. This aspect of the strike marked out the ways in which relationships between men and women in coalfield communities had changed – and the ways in which they had stayed the same.

*"In Port Talbot they (the policemen) were catching hold of women and throwing them over the barriers. Not asking them tidy. One of them, a Greenham Common girl, she told them 'Take your hands off me', and he went white, he went like a ghost, full of temper. 'You ask me tidy' she said, and he asked her tidy and she went over the barrier tidy. But the other one came head first. He didn't ask her, he just flung her over"*

*– woman from Ammanford support group describing pickets in Port Talbot*[41]


Image above: Dalkeith Miners Women's Support Group demonstrating in support of the strike.

## Divided Communities

Nowhere was the strike more controversial than in Nottinghamshire. The county was the second largest coalfield in the country after Yorkshire; but unlike in Yorkshire, the majority of miners here decided not to go on strike. A significant minority, however, did strike. Wendy Minney, whose boyfriend and father were both on strike, said it felt like 'a civil war'. In some pits, there were only a few dozen miners on strike; in others, it was more evenly divided.[46]

Nottinghamshire collieries were particular targets for pickets from South Yorkshire, the epicentre of the strike, with which it shared a county border. These picket lines were some of the most heavily policed and violent of the strike, as flying pickets attempted to stop the working Nottinghamshire miners from going into the collieries. Some women who were married to working miners remembered the effects of their husbands going through the picket lines every day, and the knock-on effects this could have on their wives. "Polly", the wife of a working miner from a pit village in Nottinghamshire, remembered that:

> They'd go to walk through the gates, and through these ... men, and placards and everything, and have things thrown at them, and spat on and anything. And some of the men, to be fair, it did affect them a bit, really. And then when they got home you see, they'd be quiet, and the wives didn't know how to ... and that was, another – a difficult bit of the knock-on.[47]

Polly was so concerned about the effects that the picketing was having on the men and their wives that she started her own women's group in the village, echoing the women's groups that were supporting striking miners and their families in other areas of the country.

Nor were the tensions confined to the picket line and home – Colette Butterly, who was a teenager at school in Mansfield at the time, and whose father worked through the strike, remembered being hit by another girl from her school who had found out her father was working.[48] Yet some working miners' family members remembered that they were relatively unaffected by the strike, particularly where men were working in pits where the workforce was still overwhelmingly at work. The impact of the strike was, thus, felt very unevenly.

Of course, it was not just in Nottinghamshire where there were miners who worked, and elsewhere in the country, where men decided to return to work early, it often had a huge impact on the women in their families. "Joanne", from North East England, remembered her father returning to work partway through the strike, as the family was close to becoming destitute: his first day back was the only time she saw her father cry. Her family was ostracised, and a brick was thrown through their kitchen window: despite being only 10 years old at the time, she was often called a 'scab' at school and remembered the events as 'traumatic'.[49] In South Wales, "Carol" faced a similar situation when her father returned to work three weeks before the strike's end. She was 16 at the time, and got up every morning to cook his breakfast before he went to work; the hostility towards her father was such that a policeman had to be stationed outside their door, and she wanted to show her support for his decision.[50]

Some women themselves worked for the Coal Board, or in ancillary roles at collieries, such as in the canteen, and had to make decisions for themselves about whether or not to strike. Many of these women were in COSA, the administrative section of the NUM, and were under pressure to take part in the strike, though a large number did not. Jean Shadbolt, from Annesley in Nottinghamshire, kept on her clerical job at the colliery even though her husband was a leading member of the NUM and a prominent striking miner. Her husband did not press Jean to come out on strike; in fact, both were relieved that at least Jean's wage was coming into the house, which was important given they had two teenage daughters to feed. But, she remembered,

'the offices weren't picketed often, but I had to cross the picket line, to go to work, and every time they were there, somebody shouted, why are you at work, your husband's on strike.'[51]

Others faced more pressure: Roni Chapman, from Doncaster in Yorkshire, was a Labour councillor who also worked in the library at Coal House, the administrative headquarters of the National Coal Board, in the town. She worked during the first few weeks of the strike, but was quickly put under intense pressure from her fellow councillors to come out in support of the miners: one of them wrote 'blackleg' on the chair in the council chamber. She decided to come out on strike, but felt her loyalties were split between her colleagues at the Coal Board and the striking miners, saying that, 'I knew whatever I did, I wasn't going to do right by everybody.'[52] Coal House was often the focus of bitter picket line disputes. Christine Wooldridge, who also worked there, remembered the picket lines she regularly crossed, and having to wipe herself down from being spat on: 'it was the most horrendous thing and it was terrifying.'[53]

Those women who were married to striking miners in Nottinghamshire remembered the difficulties of the time vividly. Some who were active in supporting the strike felt that the striking Nottinghamshire miners had been forgotten, and that Nottinghamshire miners were unfairly portrayed as all being at work. Many felt isolated in their communities, where the majority were not on strike. Janet Slater from Annesley, who was an activist in her local miners' support group, said,

> There was always this feeling of isolation, really, that, you know, these few – and it was a few men – were almost a bit, not as important, because there wasn't as many of them. Actually, they were the bigger heroes to me, because it was a harder thing to do.

Janet remembered 'just wishing you lived in Yorkshire'.[54] Like Janet, Rita Wakefield and her two daughters Wendy Minney and Kim Hickling, who all supported the strike, remembered that their communities were deeply divided by the dispute, with some people still not speaking up to the present day: 'Thatcher's got so much to answer for: she killed communities.'[55]

The strike divided communities, and created lasting rifts in some families. It was not so black and white for everybody, though. Marie Price, from Sutton in Ashfield, in Nottinghamshire, was married to a striking miner, Alan. Marie was deeply involved in the local women's support group, and both she and Alan were strong supporters of the strike. They had five sons, four of whom worked down the pit. Yet only one stayed out for the duration of the strike, with two returning to work and one not coming out at all. Marie, however, was adamant that the strike would not 'break the family', telling us that, 'I didn't like it, but nothing was going to turn me against the lads.'[56]

## Legacies

The strike ended on 3 March 1985, not in a negotiated settlement, but in total defeat for the miners: they were being driven back to work, with no concessions. Many striking miners' wives felt anger, despair, and disappointment, but many also felt relief. In many coalfields where the strike had remained nearly solid until the end, miners – and often their wives and families too – marched back to work behind their NUM lodge banner. These processions were moments of pride and yet also of sadness for many who marched.

On 8 March 1985, National Women Against Pit Closures' long-planned International Women's Day rally in the Saltergate football stadium in Chesterfield went ahead. Many women from support groups in Derbyshire, Yorkshire and further afield went, and Arthur Scargill addressed the crowds, offering thanks to all who had supported the strike, and particularly to Women Against Pit Closures. At the end of his speech, the women sang 'We are women, we are strong', the song by Mal Finch that had become the women's support movement's unofficial theme tune. The opening verse ran:

> We are women, we are strong,
> We are fighting for our lives
> Side by side with our men
> Who work the nation's mines.

Christine Worth, from Derbyshire, was there that day:

> I remember stamping, and I re- remember being a bit scared, because we made so much noise, we were stamping so loudly in this very flimsy football stadium, which was the old Chesterfield football stadium… I'm thinking *crikey, we're gonna bring this – we're gonna bring this stand down if we're not careful!* I remember Scargill saying, *first I've ever been shut up by women.*[57]

Many women's support groups had thought about continuing to meet after the strike finished. The National Women Against Pit Closures organisation certainly intended to keep the movement going as a national network, and kept holding meetings and producing a regular newsletter until 1988, but in a much reduced size.[58] Most local women's groups wound up almost as soon as the strike finished. A few still had money and food to give out, and some kept distributing food parcels for several weeks. But soup kitchens usually closed immediately. Women who had been seeing fellow activists on a daily or weekly basis were now isolated and focused on their own business, meaning many women lost their support networks.

In the aftermath of the strike, most women *had to* be primarily concerned with their homes and their families. Many, if not most, had significant debts, and building societies, banks, and local councils who had given loans or mortgage or rent holidays now came knocking. It took some families years to feel they had got back on their feet; worst-off were those men who had been sacked during the strike, leaving them with no job, no redundancy payment, and no pension. Many women wanted, above all, to get "back to normal": they did not want to change the way they related to their husbands or families radically, and did not want to get more deeply involved in political activism.

Writing in *New Socialist* in October 1984, Jean McCrindle, who was treasurer of the National Women Against Pit Closures organisation, wrote that 'everyone agrees that things have changed completely between men and women in mining communities.'[59] This was true in some households. Aggie Currie, from Armthorpe, near Doncaster, became deeply involved in activism during the strike, travelling extensively around the country and abroad to give speeches and raise funds. Her husband took on much of the work at home because of this, and the effects of this role reversal were profound. Aggie looked back on the strike as a moment which changed her sense of self:

before the strike, she thought, 'I must have been a bloody clockwork doll',[60] attending to the household and family's needs over her own. The strike gave her a new sense of confidence and transformed her relationship with her husband.

Yet, like most of the women we interviewed in 2018 and 2019, Aggie did not identify as a 'feminist'.[61] Many interviewees felt that 'feminism' meant the abolition of traditional gender roles, prioritised women over men, or even meant 'man-hating': on this definition, many preferred not to call themselves feminists, even if they did believe in the equality of men and women. Similar attitudes are found in other oral history collections; for example, in the interviews collected by Betty Heathfield shortly after the strike. Betty was a prominent activist nationally in the women's movement during the strike, and wife of Peter Heathfield, NUM general secretary. One woman interviewed for her project said, 'we don't class ourselves as feminists ... we still want to be married women. We still want to love our husbands. Love our kids.'[62] The legacy of the new experiences some women gained because of the miners' strike was nowhere near as simple as creating a new feminist uprising in coalfield communities, but for some women, activism and work did transform their sense of what they, as women, could do in profoundly important ways.

The defeat of the strike in 1985 led to the run-down of the industry over the following decade. Some pits closed swiftly – 23 in 1985, 17 in 1986 – while others kept going for longer. In 1992, Michael Heseltine, President of the Board of Trade in John Major's Conservative government, announced another major round of pit closures, and in January 1993, seven pit camps were set up to contest these. Caroline Poland, whose partner Dave had been a striking miner in 1984-5 and who had been involved in Sheffield Women Against Pit Closures in that strike, was involved in the camp at Houghton Main in the Dearne Valley, in South Yorkshire. Wives and partners of miners, and other women supporting the industry, kept the camp staffed day and night for six months.[63] As Caroline suggested, without the widespread mobilisation of women in 1984-5, and the networks created then, the pit camps – which also drew inspiration from the women's peace camp at Greenham Common – would never have come into being.[64] Nevertheless, in the face of Tory governments determined to run down Britain's coal industry, this opposition ultimately proved futile.

Coal had been one of Britain's most significant industries: in the nineteenth century it drove the industrial revolution and the expanding British Empire, but by the end of the millennium it was all-but-gone. At the same time that mining was contracting, so were manufacturing and heavy industry, and in their place came, in the main, service sector jobs. These were often not well-paid, and it became more and more necessary for families to have two breadwinners if they wanted to maintain standards of living. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, women therefore worked longer hours, and went back to work more quickly after their children were born. Many men had to travel further away in search of good jobs. The workforce became more female, and jobs were usually less heavy and less dirty – but they were also often less secure, less unionised, and less well-paid. The loss of the strike thus precipitated significant changes in the nature of work, family life and community in Britain's coalfields: this was the legacy that coalfield women and their families lived with in the decades after 1985. Marjorie Simpson had a flourishing business in Stainforth, South Yorkshire, before the strike. Her husband was a draughtsman working for the NCB, and her son was a miner, working underground. Her testimony captures how much things changed after the strike, the loss of the coal industry, and all the changes associated with deindustrialisation: 'it destroyed lives and a way of living.'[65]

Despite the hardship brought about by the miners' strike, however, many of the women who spoke to us also wanted to record the positive aspects of the dispute. While the strike was a time of extreme difficulty for many, nevertheless, for some women, it was also a time when they felt the strength of their communities like never before. Maureen Coates captured the contradiction inherent in this when she told us, 'it were a bad time, but it were a good time, because everybody pulled together.'[66] Indeed, the solidarity that the strike stimulated suggested a model for how communities can pull together

and work for the benefit of all. For some women, taking part in the strike and helping to make history was one of the most important moments of their lives. It was something to be proud of forever more: in the words of Aggie Currie, 'I'd do it again in a heartbeat.'[67]

Image below (and cover): Maerdy Women's Support Group, South Wales. Copyright Martin Shakeshaft

## Studies of Women in the Miners' Strike

Activists were the first to write the story of women in the miners' strike, and they began to write it while the strike was still ongoing. In articles in the left wing and feminist press, they emphasised how women's organisation in support of the strike had politicised coalfield women and expanded their horizons.

Newspapers like the *Guardian* carried articles talking about a new 'feminist' image for miners' wives.[68] *Spare Rib*, Britain's biggest feminist magazine, published many similar pieces on the strike. In October 1984, Loretta Loach published an article in *Spare Rib* arguing the women's support movement had 'created a profound and unprecedented change in the essentially male culture of the mining community'.[69] Miner's wife and political activist Maureen Douglass wrote, in December 1984, that,

> This movement of women against pit closures has released women from their isolated role in the home into organising. This is something they have never done before, bringing them into contact with aspects of politics they've not really known about previously.[70]

Why was this narrative so appealing? The reason was simple: this story captured the interest of potential left-wing supporters – particularly feminists – outside the coalfields. And the strike needed the resources of those socialists and feminists.

After the strike, it was activists and politically-committed journalists who wrote the first draft of history, and they, too, focused on the story of coalfield women who had been "liberated" by their experiences in the strike. Communist Party member Vicky Seddon edited a collection called *The Cutting Edge: Women and the Strike*, published in 1986, which emphasised the ways that women were politicised by the strike, learned about feminism, battled against sexism and misogyny, and triumphed. A year later, Jean Stead – a *Guardian* journalist and a committed feminist – published a popular book entitled *Never the Same Again* which told the same story: coalfield women's activism in the strike had emancipated them, and they had created their own version of feminism:

> The women's movement which evolved during the strike regenerated pride among all working-class women. Their feminism was based not on a doctrine of individual opportunity, but on the strength of the solidarity of women to achieve a better and fairer society.[71]

Journalist and feminist Bea Campbell also argued that women's activism in the strike, far from representing a movement to support their menfolk, was a contestation of male domination in coalfield communities and industrial politics.[72]

Books about the miners' strike have usually devoted at least a few pages to the women's movement, and the account usually mirrors, more or less, the accounts given by feminist activists and journalists. For example, Martin Adeney and John Lloyd's study of the strike, first published in 1986, devoted three pages to the women's movement, painting a picture of coalfield communities before the strike as 'very male-dominated' and traditional, and suggesting that the women's activism during the strike had politicised them in new ways.[73] This has been, then, the most common narrative of women in the strike: a narrative of heroic activism and political transformation. It is the story still commonly celebrated in articles in newspapers like the *Guardian* and books like journalist Triona Holden's *Queen Coal*, published in 2005, which argued that during the strike, 'women came out of the kitchen', and 'discovered they had a powerful voice'.[74]

# WE'LL BE HERE RIGHT TO THE END

**The 1984 miners strike will go down in history as a crucial and bitter dispute. It is already into its eighth month and the government and coal board have remained steadily intransigent. But it will also be recorded as a turning point in the lives of hundreds of working class women who have surfaced amid this strife and have shown a capacity for organising that has offended the pride of many a miner. Here *Loretta Loach* from *Spare Rib* meets with two such women.**

## AND AFTER

Bobby and Sue come from a small pit village called Bentley in South Yorkshire. They are sisters and their family have been part of the mining community for over 100 years. The decisions that affect their lives and those of other working class communities are remote from them. 'It happens down in London' said Sue, the youngest of the two. 'It were nothing to do with us. We imagined that that people in London thought we were still in clogs and flat caps. We're northerners, you're southerners. When you had snow down in London we'd say 'well they've got everything else, they may as well have that as well.' Before, we didn't used to care two sods what Margaret Thatcher were doin' with oil or price of oil, now we do because it affects us.' 'Put it this way' says Bobby carefully 'you read more and you're more wary of what you read. At one time I didn't care about coal, I were a wife, those things didn't concern me, but now we're taking some of those things on.'

Until the moves to safeguard their livelihoods, Bobby and Sue have never been involved in anything even distantly political. Their action, like those of other women in the coalfields, grew out of the practical needs of the community, but through their energy and initiative they and the other women who make up Bentley Women's Action Group have created a profound and unprecedented change in the essentially male culture of the mining community. 'Now when we're in pub we sit with the men and join in instead of chatting about kids and the home and things. We can sit with 'em and talk about pit. We want to know about things, about what's happening in the union.' 'Some mornings I've been picketing before him and I've come home and he's done the housework.' 'I've always thought well, men do thinking. But I speak my mind now more than I've ever done. I've always been outspoken but I've never pushed myself.'

The women are now central in the community, they have extended their influence to every area of village life, even the sacred male institution of Sunday cricket has been brought within their remit. 'By weekend we've no money left out of Social and we don't do meals in kitchen, that's the time when you can get depressed. So we've organised games on Sunday. Women play men at cricket and rounders.' How have the men responded to that? 'You know, you'd think we were playing test cricket at Lords. They take it so seriously, you know, "we'll show them women". One day' Sue said imitating them 'they said "if there's any cheating we're not playing anymore." They even make us mark it officially on sheet — Bentley Women's Action Group versus Bentley pickets. They made us wear bloody pads and they couldn't stand it if a woman hit a good one.'

### How did it all start?

'We went on a rally for Women Against Pit Closures and said if anyone is interested in setting up a kitchen let's get in contact with one another. Our first meeting were about five weeks into strike. We thought kitchens were a good idea because we women could then play a part and keep everybody together. We'd be able to feed everybody so we could keep fighting against pit closures, but we didn't expect it to last as long as this. At first you only got men in for food, women never came, they thought it were only for men, now they come, and kids. Everybody sits in with everybody,

This narrative has become cemented in the collective imagination, such that Mark Hudson commented in 1994 that:

> The involvement of the miners' wives through the Women's Support Groups is, in the public mind, one of the most enduring images of the strike – the valiant women, strident beneath their banners, proclaiming their husbands' right to be miners in their ancestral communities. It has become proverbial that through the strike countless housewives became politicised, going on to become councillors, media pundits and even MPs. One would have thought there were thousands of women involved in every village.[75]

Research from social scientists and gender studies scholars has, however, contested this narrative, arguing that at best, it represents just one part of the story. First of all, it was only a small minority of striking miners' wives who became involved in activism. It is difficult to quantify exactly how many women became involved, but most support groups had a few dozen members at most, and many supported hundreds of families. A sociological study by J. Winterton and R. Winterton, carried out in Yorkshire after the strike, calculated that only 4.7 per cent of Yorkshire coalfield women became active in collective activity during the strike.[76] Another study suggested that less than 25 per cent were involved in any support activity during the strike.[77] Though activism in the strike could have profoundly important impacts on those involved, they were only a minority within their communities.

Image left: Loretta Loach writing on the women's support movement in the strike in *Spare Rib*, October 1984. Copyright Loretta Loach. Licensed under a creative commons license

Social scientists have also emphasised the importance of recognising that in February 1984 mining communities and families were not stuck in the past, inhabiting "traditional" patriarchal gender roles with women at home and men dominant. As Peter Gibbon pointed out in an article published in 1988, some of those authors who presented mining communities as uniquely marked by 'patriarchal oppression' relied heavily on the sociological study *Coal is Our Life*, published three decades previously in 1956, and widely critiqued in the years since then.[78] *Coal is Our Life*, a study of Featherstone, in Yorkshire, suggested that coalfield women were much less likely to have access to paid labour than working-class women elsewhere; but by the 1980s this was no longer the case. In 1981, 56 per cent of 16-60 year old women were in paid work nationally, and the figure was almost exactly the same in West Yorkshire mining communities, varying between 45 per cent and 55 per cent; it seems that most coalmining communities did not diverge significantly from the typical patterns of women's work by the 1980s.[79]

A third revisionist argument made in much of the literature from social scientists relates to the sources of support in the home during and after the strike. Sheila Allen and Fiona Measham argued, based on interviews with coalfield women from 1986, that 60 per cent drew their main source of support in the strike from family, and that there was little permanent change in the domestic division of labour in striking families.[80] Allen and Measham, like other scholars, have argued that though the strike changed things for some families, prompting men to take on new roles within the home, in fact longer-term trends played a major part in reshaping family life in coalfield communities in the 1980s, 1990s and beyond. The loss of the strike, the swift closure of most of Britain's mines, and the resulting loss of skilled, relatively well-paid work for men accelerated a trend towards two-income households. It meant women's wages became more necessary within many households, with knock-on effects for men's participation in household chores.

Fourthly, scholars have undertaken detailed studies of the organisation and ideology of women's support groups in the strike, with important conclusions for how we understand the movement.

Carol Spence and Jean Stephenson, in their study of County Durham, found that many of the women who got involved in activism in the strike were already activists in other contexts – they were far from politically naïve.[81] Spence and Stephenson also emphasised that for many women, their motivations for getting involved were often quite simply to support their menfolk and their communities, not to contest male dominance.[82] Monica Shaw and Mave Mundy concurred in their study of women involved in activism in the strike, suggesting that while the strike prompted *some* women to question gender relations, for many activists it did no such thing: they saw themselves in a supportive role, helping husbands and communities, not challenging them. Shaw and Mundy argue for the complexity and ambivalence of women's experiences, and suggest that to see women's role in the strike as representing a mass politicisation in terms of either gender or class is overly simplistic.[83]

This work from social scientists points to several conclusions. While the story told about women's politicisation and transformation in the strike holds good for *some* women and *some* families, women's experiences in aggregate were much more diverse. On the eve of the strike, communities were not so "traditional" and women were not so politically-inexperienced as some of the presentations of the women's support movement might have us believe. For many women, activism in the strike was not about challenging patriarchy or gender roles: quite the opposite, it was about defending the status quo, and their husbands' and sons' jobs. And the majority of women did not get involved in activism in the strike: in these families, women's wages and the support of other family members were the main sources of support during the strike. The miners' strike had a transformative effect for some of the women involved, but that should not blind us to the diversity of women's experiences, and the ways in which the strike was just one – albeit immensely significant – moment in longer processes of economic and social change in Britain after 1945.

## Further Reading

There are archival holdings relating to women in the miners' strike all around Great Britain. Many local archives hold the papers of support groups, and women involved in support groups, including, for example, in Barnsley, Fife, and Sheffield.

Both the People's History Museum in Manchester and the Salford Working Class Movement Library hold extensive collections relating to women and the strike, including, at the People's History Museum, the papers of Hilary Wainwright, as well as the papers of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners.

In London, the Women's Library at the London School of Economics holds the collections of Betty Heathfield and Jean McCrindle. Feminist Archive North, in Leeds, also has material relating to women in the strike.

In South Wales, the South Wales Miners' Library and Richard Burton Archive at the University of Swansea, and the Glamorgan Record Office in Cardiff hold extensive collections relating to groups and activists in the strike.

The National Coal Mining Museum for Scotland also holds relevant materials, and the National Coal Mining Museum for England is now home to the full collection of interviews conducted for this project. Many of these are already available for researchers to use.

There are many collections of photographs relating to women in the strike. Photographs by Raissa Page are held at the Richard Burton Archives, in Swansea, and the work of photographers in the Format Agency – a pioneering all-women agency – is held at the Bishopsgate Archive, in London.

Many women's support groups published accounts of their members' experiences in the strike, often accompanied by poetry and images. These were often designed to raise money during the strike, or after the strike to raise funds for sacked and victimised miners. This is just a selection of the many books and pamphlets published:

Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures, *Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures*, 2 volumes, 1984 and 1985.

Coventry Miners' Wives Support Group, *Mummy ... What Did You Do in the Strike?*, 1986.

Levy, Catriona, and Mauchline Miners' Wives, *'A Very Hard Year': The 1984-85 Miners' Strike in Mauchline*, 1985.

Lothian Women's Support Group, *Women Living the Strike*, 1986.

Newton, Gwen, ed., *We are Women, We are Strong: The Stories of Northumberland Miners' Wives 1984-1985*, 1985.

North Yorkshire Women Against Pit Closures, *Strike 84-85*, 1985.

Notts. Women Against Pit Closures, *The Struggle Goes On: Campaign in Support of the National Union of Mineworkers in Notts.*, c. 1986.

Sheffield Women Against Pit Closures, *We are Women, We are Strong*, 1987.

*The Last Coals of Spring. Poems, Stories and Songs by the Women of Easington Colliery*, 1985.

Edited volumes of oral histories and the autobiographies and diaries of women involved in the strike are also a rich source for understanding the experiences of women in the strike. A few are listed here:

Dolby, Norma, *Norma Dolby's Diary: An Account of the Great Miners' Strike*, 1987.

Headon, Jayne D., *Mrs Hellfire "You Said It!", The Life and Endeavours of Hefina Headon with Memories from Family and Friends*, 2015.

Keating, Jackie, *Counting the Cost*, 1992.

Millller, Jill, *You Can't Kill the Spirit: Women in a Welsh Mining Valley*, 1986.

Paton Black, Catherine, *At the Coalface: My Life as a Miner's Wife*, 2012.

Thornton, Jane, *All the Fun of the Fight*, 1987.

Witham, Joan, *Hearts and Minds. The Story of the Women of Nottinghamshire in the Miners' Strike, 1984-5*, 1986.

Most general books about the miners' strike have some discussion of women's role in the strike:

Adeney, Martin, and John Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike 1984-5: Loss Without Limit*, 1986.

Beckett, Francis, and David Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line. The Miners' Strike and the Battle for Industrial Britain*, 2009.

Beynon, Huw, ed., *Digging Deeper: Issues in the Miners' Strike*, 1985.

Milne, Seumas, *The Enemy Within: The Secret War against the Miners*, 2014.

Samuel, Raphael, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Boanas, eds., *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5*, 1986.

Studies of the strike by sociologists and historians also generally contain some discussion of the position of women:

Curtis, Ben, *The South Wales Miners, 1964-1985*, 2013.

Phillips, Jim, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland, 1984-85*, 2012.

Waddington, David, Maggie Wykes and Chas Critcher, *Split at the Seams? Community, Continuity and Change after the 1984-5 Coal Dispute*, 1991.

Winterton, J. and R. Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict: The 1984-5 Miners' Strike in Yorkshire*, 1989.

And there have also been several books published over the years specifically focused on women in the strike:

Holden, Triona, *Queen Coal: Women of the Miners' Strike*, 2005.

Seddon, Vicky, ed., *The Cutting Edge. Women and the Pit Strike*, 1986.

Stead, Jean, *Never the Same Again. Women and the Miners' Strike*, 1987.

# Endnotes

1 Figures relating to the miners' strike are often controversial and contested. This figure is extrapolated from Andrew J. Richards, *Miners on Strike: Class Solidarity and Division in Britain*, 1997, p. 109.

2 "Robyn" (not her real name), Yorkshire, born 1963, WMS-009, National Coal Mining Museum for England Archive (all WMS interviews are held here).

3 Barnsley Miners' Wives Action Group, *We Struggled to Laugh*, 1987, p. 47.

4 Lothian Women's Support Group, *Women Living the Strike*, 1986, p. 9.

5 Kay Case, South Wales, born 1948, WMS-012.

6 Sue, Kent, born 1956, WMS-058.

7 Kay Sutcliffe, Kent, born 1949, WMS-085.

8 Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'National Women Against Pit Closures: Gender, Trade Unionism and Community Activism in the Miners' Strike, 1984-5', Contemporary British History, 2019.

9 Jean McCrindle, 'The National Organisation of Women Against Pit Closures in the Miners' Strike of 1984-5', PhD thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 2001, p. 78.

10 "Polly" (not her real name), Nottinghamshire, born 1944, WMS-045.

11 Anne Kirby, Scotland, born 1955, WMS-043.

12 Steve McGrail and Vicky Patterson, '*For as Long as it Takes!' Cowie Miners in the Strike, 1984-5*, c. 1985.

13 Pat Smith, Yorkshire, born 1949, WMS-063.

14 Dulais Valley, Neath and District Miner's Strike Support Fund Minute Book, Minutes of meeting on 6 May 1984, Miners' Welfare Hall, Seven Sisters, 1994/30 box 4 of 8, Richard Burton Archive, University of Swansea.

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16 Anne Kirby, Scotland, born 1955, WMS-043.

17 Liz French, Kent, born 1950, WMS-032.

18 Mary Hole, South Wales, born 1935, WMS-038.

19 *The Last Coals of Spring. Poems, Stories and Songs by the Women of Easington Colliery*, 1985, p. 4.

20 Dennis Warwick and Gary Littlejohn, *Coal, Capital and Culture: A Sociological Analysis of Mining Communities in West Yorkshire*, 1992, p. 116.

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22 Linda Chapman, North East, born 1958, WMS-014.

23 "Pippa Morgan" (not her real name), South Wales, born 1962, WMS-070.

24 Tony Parker, *Red Hill: A Mining Community*, 1986, p. 149.

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27 Joyce Boyes, Yorkshire, born 1955, WMS-007.

28 Pat Smith, Yorkshire, born 1949, WMS-063.

29 Mandy Slater, Yorkshire, born 1937, WMS-024.

30 Tanya Dower, South Wales, born 1967, WMS-025.

31 Mary Hole, South Wales, born 1935, WMS-038.

32 Alison Anderson, Scotland, born 1959, WMS-001.

33 'The Kent Miners' Case', SERTUC and Kent NUM, EVT/MINESTRIKE/1, Salford Working Class Movement Library.

34 Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson, 'National Women Against Pit Closures'.

35 Janet Slater, Nottinghamshire, born 1954, WMS-062.

36 Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson, 'National Women Against Pit Closures'.

37 Pat Smith, Yorkshire, born 1949, WMS-063.

38 Jessica Gibson, Scotland, born 1963, WMS-033.

39 Janie Robertson, Scotland, born 1955, WMS-057.

40 Aggie Currie, Yorkshire, born 1950, WMS-022.

41 Ammanford Women's Support Group interviewed by Jill Evans, 14 August 1984, AUD/587 transcript, South Wales Miners' Library.

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43 Sian James, South Wales, born 1959, WMS-040.

44 Jessica Gibson, Scotland, born 1963, WMS-033.

45 Maureen Coates, Yorkshire, born 1942, WMS-016.

46 Wendy Minney, Nottinghamshire, born 1964, WMS-036.

47 "Polly" (not her real name), Nottinghamshire, born 1944, WMS-045.

48 Colette Butterly, Nottinghamshire, born 1968, WMS-010.

49 "Joanne" (not her real name), North East England, born 1974, WMS-066.

50 "Carol" (not her real name), South Wales, born 1968, WMS-042.

51 Jean Shadbolt, Nottinghamshire, born 1948, WMS-041.

52 Roni Chapman, Yorkshire, born 1941, WMS-013.

53 Christine Wooldridge, Yorkshire, born 1942, WMS-082.

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76 J. Winterton and R. Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict: The 1984-85 Miners' Strike in Yorkshire*, 1989, p. 122.

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*We are women, we are strong,*
*We are fighting for our lives*
*Side by side with our men*
*Who work the nation's mines.*
*– opening verse of Mal Finch's*
*'We are women, we are strong'*

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