

Miner Conflict – Major Impact

an Anarchist Communist perspective on the Miners Strike 1984-85

by Dreyfus



Preface

In the 40th anniversary year of the British Miners Strike (1984/85), we were approached by the Kate Sharpley Library with an invitation to draw together our recollections of that strike from an Anarchist Communist perspective.

We were pleased to be able to do this and that is what follows. We are grateful for the prompt to review our history from this class struggle perspective - one less present than many in the revolutionary archive.

What is the Kate Sharpley Library?

“The Kate Sharpley Library exists to preserve and promote anarchist history. We preserve the output of the anarchist movement, mainly in the form of books, pamphlets, newspapers, leaflets and manuscripts but also badges, recordings, photographs etc. We also have the work of historians and other writers on the anarchist movement.” <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/>

Introduction

This is a personal and largely anecdotal history of participation as an anarchist communist in the great Miners’ Strike 1984/85, based on my own experience.

Though largely accurate, I cannot guarantee my memory is correct in every detail except in the emotive and sensory nature of that recall.

Although this is neither an analytical nor academic study of the strike, many of which abound elsewhere, it will inevitably reflect the perspectives my comrades and I had and developed throughout that struggle.

I will try to convey a general context of the events that were taking place at the time, but like most involved, my key memories will probably hang on those particular moments that had the biggest impact on me and thus my recall of that period. “Anarchdots’ perhaps! ‘Simply put, I will tell a few key stories of my involvement and the environment in which they happened.

I have used no identifiable militants’ names throughout, though all reference to the masses involved, villains and vacillators living or dead, are entirely intentional.

Six months before the outbreak of the strike, September 1983, I had decided not to return to university after a year's leave of absence following the deaths of several close friends. I had already been an anarchist for several years and a queer and, consequently soon after, AIDS activist.

I had been a lousy student and had helped organise several occupations against the government's education cuts. Having been on the Union Council when I took a year out, I was already persona non grata for the university authorities who had banned me from being on campus for the following year - which I ignored.

In short, I had already spent about 18 months living in what was effectively a diaspora commune of anarchists scattered around North Staffordshire. This scattered commune went by the name 'Careless Talk Collective' (CT), founded in 1980 by a former member of Solidarity for Social Revolution and a collection of anarchists, libertarian and council communists.

At the start of the strike, the beginning of March 1984 we, a household and a small extended network of comrades, were living, largely unemployed, in the West Midlands mining areas around Stoke-on-Trent, North Staffordshire.

We lived in terraced streets alongside neighbours who were on strike (at times) and heavily involved with our community from start to finish, both being influenced and influencing. Part of the struggle, not 'intervening' from the outside.

The Beginning

The strike did not come as a surprise. The potential for conflict had been rumbling on as the Thatcher government sought to restructure the mining

industry and close less profitable pits. Some Scottish pits had closed the previous year. The National Coal Board's (NCB) 'Plan For Coal' negotiated in part with the mining unions, had identified which further pits might be at risk so had an agreed timetable of reform and restructure.

Despite £3 billion nominally allocated in 1983 under the NCB for future investment, the sudden announcement of the decision for closures of 20 pits losing 20,000 jobs in the spring of 1984 was the effective trigger for the strike call by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) under the charismatic leadership of Arthur Scargill.

The pits affected in our area were Florence, Silverdale and Wolstanton, the latter two areas where we, our friends and neighbours lived.

I recall the initial atmosphere as one of 'bring it on!' A long overdue major challenge to the piecemeal destruction of the UK public sector and industrial centres. The Tories had swept to power on the back of the 'Winter of Discontent' and with the avowed intent of putting the genie of class struggle back in its bottle.

It had already successfully taken on large sections of the working class one at a time, including public sector workers, nurses and the heavy guns of the rail and steel industries. It had now strategically picked its moment with the miners - the end of winter when demand for coal would fall. Effective resistance was overdue and the time felt ripe for the mobilisation such a conflict might require.

This wasn't altruism or an act of goodwill to support our mining communities. Nor was it the expression of politics, patronage or tokenism. This was the instinctive yet enlightened self-interest of class solidarity. Our group consisted

of people affected by the Tories attack on education, work and welfare. We were a variety of genders and sexual identities, in the Thatcher era this already designated some of us criminals or illegal.

We lived in a poor working class district already impoverished by the closures of Steel Works and the Pot Banks of the ceramics industry. We were overcrowded tenants in run down houses we couldn't afford.

We were part of the working class fighting back, organised and conscious, knowing that the outcome would affect whether our lives got better or worse. Sharing our struggles in active solidarity with those of our community.

We felt well prepared from the start. Around a dozen of us in the group had long been producing regular newsletters and leaflets for local distribution. We had our own typewriters, our own hand operated Roneo ink barrel printing machine, paper, print ink and wax stencils on which to type. The typewriter was the Clarion of the day.

Our, my, involvement in the strike was distinctive in its detail but not remotely in its intent. Hundreds of thousands, millions one way or another played some part. For each one of them there will be the general narrative of that 12 month period though like me I suspect the memory will hinge around a series of significant events where we may have played a particular part.

First Weeks

Miners unanimously walked out first in the Yorkshire pit of Cortonwood on March 6th sending what came to be called "flying pickets" around the various coalfields encouraging walkouts in solidarity. With much initial success, except in the Midlands, the strike became official six days later on March 12th.

Despite the fact that nearly 80% of miners were to come out on strike in those first few days, around 165,000 in total, they did so through 'pit-head' appeals rather than an organised national ballot. This became the first point of polarisation. It was the focus of those who supported the government for its lack of democracy and, the excuse of those who were to scab.

No one in our community that I was aware of took the side of the convenient democrats versus the strikers, but it set the tone of a lot of our early interventions. Our first visits were to the pickets of Wolstanton, later to Silverdale and then between the two. The debate there wasn't ballots but scabs and winning, though some felt it a tactical error because of how it was being used.

The general feeling was 'we are on strike now it's our strike and you're with us or a scab'. With such a strong sense of solidarity and trust in their union the NUM, we were welcomed politely, but not with great interest. They imagined the strike would be short-lived; many of them felt they and the NUM had the resources and access to money to tide them over, and we could support them, but that should be through solidarity and not necessarily on the picket line.

This reflected a 'compulsory masculinity' of the early days of the strike: 'we can do it and we can do it ourselves.' Primarily making ourselves known and trying to get as much information as possible, we began producing leaflets and poster images supporting the spontaneity and solidarity of the strike and highlighting the hypocrisy of those attempting to undermine it with 'democratic' arguments.

It became clear from our discussions during street distributions and early meetings that which side of this position you were on had nothing to do with

balloting but depended entirely on whether you were for the government or for the miners.

The government and its loyal Labour Party opposition spouted this position claiming the strike was illegal; the scabs echoed the argument calling the strike illegitimate, while the press applauded and rallied the non-strikers and the government itself.

No surprises there. Class war and revolution are not about inhabiting the terrain of your enemy. Though the role of 'democracy' and decision making process in the course of class struggle was to develop a deepening debate within the revolutionary milieu. This debate became more radical as a strike progressed, its challenges grew and its options narrowed.

First Months

Optimism changed to persistence and grim determination very quickly. Nearly 25% of miners who hadn't come out on strike proved impervious to appeals and argument and were lionised by the Thatcher government. That traditional solidarity had failed, primarily in the Midlands pits, caused anger, frustration and some demoralisation. With 25% of the workforce scabbing and moreover, in the most modernised and profitable pits, the industry could not be brought to a halt. A further blow was to come.

One smaller specialist industry union responsible for pit safety, the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) had the power to shut all the pits down and voted to do so in their ballot in April 1984. Despite a majority however they fell short of the 2/3 required by their constitution and consequently did not. In many areas their members did not

cross picket lines, but where pits were fully operational, they enabled work to continue safely and legally. No one balked at the democratic deficiency here!

Other unions were high on rhetoric but thin on action. Many already had bloody noses and their bureaucracies were guarding their own power bases against further diminishment from government assault. They went along with the 'failure of democracy' narrative. Within six weeks, the strike looked besieged.

So "Coal Not Dole", "Close a pit, kill a community!" became the widespread slogan. This signalled the shift from a pure industrial struggle to a community one. The role of women in the mining communities, their neighbours and their many supporters began to assume a paramount importance.

The practical need for proactive support groups raising funds, collecting food, helping with distribution grew as the scale of the challenge became clear. Picket line conflict was more intractable, policing on a military scale protected the scabs and the struggle had no visible end in sight.

Anarchists

Anarchists had a rich tradition in the class struggle on the industrial front, but also of organising around community needs and struggles in their own neighbourhoods and districts. Including communities of identity, housing, squats, environmental degradation, unemployed workers and resource centres amongst others.

Across the islands, anarchists and other revolutionists were well networked. Through projects like the journal 'Intercom', embryonic national gatherings

and frequent inter-organisational exchanges meant we generally knew who was where, doing what and how to communicate.

There is also a generational tradition in anarchism. Old comrades don't so much fade away as jam with a different outfit as the decades pass creating another network of familiarity.

We worked and communicated closely with grassroots organisations in squatters and travelling communities, other groups like Workers Playtime, Wildcat, Class War, Direct Action Movement, Clydeside Anarchists and a plethora of strong local groups from Sheffield to Southampton and many more.

That a rich history of this is not recorded is because our aim was community and solidarity in class struggle not the self-promotion and recruitment practiced by the capitalist left. We didn't have the will nor resources to sing our own praises and aggrandise ourselves widely like the myriad of Leninoid-Trotskyites on the hackles of the Labour movement like Militant, SWP or the WRP.

Though there was no regular revolutionary news press as such, Edinburgh comrades continued their monthly circulation of 'Counter Information', a regular digest of key events and information relating the class struggle across the nations. Other (periodically) regular publications like Freedom, Black Flag and Class War were widely available in a network of radical book shops and workers' co-ops.

Others, like us, produced lots of agitprop leaflets for free distribution and a paper of some sort on a more ad-hoc basis. Most groups held regular, publicly accessible meetings as well as our own organisationally administrative ones.

Largely unable to afford or access other resources, most production was necessarily an 'in house' collective effort.

We may not have been common but we weren't scarce and generally made ourselves visible.

Every opportunity everywhere we argued for grass roots and community organisation outside the formal union structures. Supporting and aiding the networking of communities outside of the industry (or work itself) to hear and be heard by each other.

As the strike progressed this included solidarity street fundraising to address the increasing needs of the affected communities. In Glasgow, surrounded by pits, the regular Saturday rallies by Practical Anarchy (Clydeside Anarchists) were attracting hundreds to the call of the bagpipes and propaganda!

Other groups were more sporadic depending on resources and proximity. Given the nature of industry in general and mining in particular of that time, mining communities were as much geographical as trade based. Demonstrating and maintaining solidarity meant visits at times to distant locations - often by comrades with few more resources than the strikers themselves.

The 'Left'

While anarchists warned of the inevitability of leadership betrayal in the labour and union movement, advocating generalisation of militancy outside of union structures and beyond trade and work, the left strove to be the leadership!

Focusing on the miners as victims of the state - endless picture of police brutality. Their priority was to divert workers energies into lobbying the Trades Union Congress to provide better leadership rather than argue that workers should organise for themselves.

“TUC get off your knees and call General Strike!” became their unifying slogan, pacifying militancy in favour of bureaucracy. Beyond paper selling, they strove to win the Labour Party and its Trades Union allies leading to entryism, legalism and party building.

Meanwhile, on the ground at grassroots and community level, the conflict was generalising with increasing involvement in both action and decision-making by women in mining communities and strike supporters, often opposed by the NUM itself (See Wildcat article appendix one).

The left, too keen on taking control of the Labour Party to ditch it, endlessly called for it to risk its reputation and publicly meet with the miners’ leaders - the strike was nearly over when that happened as we’ll see later.

The anarchist response to this saccharine portrayal of working-class victimhood was to stand by the necessary use and extension of active resistance where needed to defend communities and picket lines. Most famously perhaps the ‘Class War’ groups serialisation in its papers of ‘Hospitalised Coppers’ . Wittily captioned photos of workers striking back.

Summer

A considerable level of activity as described above was taking place across the country. As spring moved into summer we, as others from their bases too, travelled regularly, largely hitching the length and breadth of the islands to

meet with other groups and to go with them to their support and picket line activities. Relative indifference to our attendance at the beginning had transformed long ago to a comradely welcome.

We particularly focused on our local pits, the Lancashire pits visiting our Wildcat comrades, with occasional excursions to Scotland and London. The strike itself wasn't our only focus, and one venture to London at the end of May illustrates the changing face of the islands in response to the strike.

'Stop The City!'

We had attended the first 'Stop The City' action in September '83. For want of a better descriptor it was an anarchistic counter-cultural mobilisation against the financial heart of the City of London's banking and trading district. Its aim was to loudly manifest against capitalism and close the Central Bank and Financial Exchange down.

Around 4000 people descended on the tiny square around Threadneedle Street and Bank Junction from early morning till the end of day. It was a festival of the oppressed: homeless people and squatters; hippies and yippies; punks, travellers and those claiming the label of anarchist of almost every description.

This rebellion against Thatcher, Reagan, the heating Cold War, imperialism, neoliberal expansionism and ecological devastation was a great success tying up thousands of police and halting 1/365th of the UK's annual financial operations for a day, closing both the Bank of England and the London Stock Exchange.

The idea to repeat it in the middle of the miners' strike with the capacity to tie up policing, particularly the much feared Metropolitan police seemed a 'no brainer', as well as a welcome chance to connect and communicate with comrades from all over the islands.

A dozen of us from around the Potteries and Staffordshire, with banners flags and leaflets relating the action to the class struggle and the miners' strike in particular set off in a minibus in the early hours of the morning of May 31st.

The closer we got to the East Midlands and consequently the mostly scabbing Nottinghamshire pits, the greater the number of lane closures, diversions and police vehicles grew. Eventually, we were stopped by a couple of police vans who ordered us out for questioning.

They obviously saw our attire, pamphlets and banners and demanded to know where we were going. Churlishly we responded that we were travelling to the heart of London to bring capitalism's beating financial heartland to a halt! We had assumed at this point that it was all too obvious to try and hide.

Much to our surprise, more than relief, they said '...okay, so long as you're not on your way to a picket line go on your way and don't let us catch you doubling back!' It was our first encounter with what became in effect a national police lockdown to end the effectiveness of dynamic flying picketing.

Another one held later in September became little more than a series of fundraisers and agitational messaging. This manifestation was for the most part ineffective but at least achieved the tying up of many thousands of the countries most experienced police.

Orgreave June 18th

The real significance of an integrated national police mobilisation was to show itself brutally at what became known as the Battle of Orgreave. Trying to emulate the successful tactics of earlier strikes in the '70's and reignite the traditional 'Tripple Alliance' between the Coal, Rail and Steel unions, the NUM called for a mass picket of the integrated coking steel plant near the Yorkshire city of Rotherham.

There the industry combined transport, coke delivery and steel manufacture. Calls for solidarity action by the Steelworkers' union was rebuffed on the grounds that it risked their jobs. This blow did not stop a mass picket of NUM members descending on the site to close it down.

Between 6000 and 8000 miners were confronted by nearly as many police from all over the country, including riot and mounted police. This had clearly been a long foreseen and well planned staged confrontation resulting in a brutal and bloody defeat for the miners. Calls for an enquiry and justice for the abused and injured continue to this day.

Police and the Courts

Orgreave shocked the nation polarising both sides around the perceived use of violence by one side or the other. For the strikers, their communities, the mass of supporters and allies, it felt the gloves were off and we were in some kind of new police state paradigm.

For the government, it was a propaganda coup. Culturally controlling what we might now call the legacy media, they presented it as victory over mindless

thuggery and disorder with the nation virtually under siege from “...the enemy within.”

Under siege was how we felt. In our streets, in our neighbourhoods, in our struggle against perhaps the greatest planned imposition of austerity to date.

The unmasking of the relationship between a national police service and a national judicial reprisal system became apparent. Mass arrests, fraudulent charges, long sentences and internal banishment.

People were tried and sentenced in record time and many not sent to prison, or on their release, were sent hundreds of miles away from their communities and families. The aim was the amplification of fear through a strategy of tension.

A level of societal coercive control I have not experienced since. But nor had I experienced such belonging and solidarity with a community of struggle as I did then.

Solidarity

This polarisation crystallised a sense of us and them. Them being the state, the courts, the bosses, the rich, the vacillating compromisers of the unions and the Labour Party. For us read enemies of capitalism and its state.

“Coal Not Dole” was the ubiquitous slogan. It seemed every town had its fundraising, food gathering, clothes collecting, solidarity and propaganda groups.

Our group along with most other anarchist organisations were leafleting or distributing each other’s papers on at least a weekly basis collecting for our

local (or nearest) pit welfare organisations. Organising or contributing at public meetings and where possible going to pickets. It felt as though despite our numbers being small, no one was idle.

Tactics

The failed strategy of the union was developing tactical responses on local and regional bases. Alongside the mass participatory solidarity of campaigns like the 'Switch on at 6!', an attempt to overload the national grid and deplete energy stocks at peak demand times, various forms of more direct action became controversially more common.

Six months into the strike with winter looming, hardship was biting deep. Even for those few at the beginning of the strike who criticised fundraising as a patronising act of charity '...like the Salvation Army' (they know who they are), it was becoming evident that it was an essential act of class solidarity to sustain the struggle. The government recognised this too.

Legal and administrative actions were taking place on national and local levels to prevent funds getting to the miners. Unfamiliar with the term 'ultra vires' before, it was now everywhere.

Literally meaning 'beyond one's legal power or authority', it was being used to challenge other unions, charities, voluntary organisations and campuses, to dry up sources of fundraising. The NUM itself was pursued successfully losing its funds in a High Court decision in October.

The state of siege grew, hunger and scarcity became real, discussions in the streets became more antagonistic as hostility to the strike was gaining ground. And bit by bit some striking miners were ebbing back to work.

Where we were, we knew people who had gone back, and wracked with shame or guilt became hostile themselves. Our neighbours, a household that had come out at the beginning of the strike and were now breaking it, stopped talking to us. We continued to use our front window to regularly propagandise and inform.

In our pit towns, even where strikers started to become a minority, their unquestioned moral authority and courage kept community infrastructures like miners' welfare and social or labour clubs - the heart of the community - in their hands. More help and resources were needed to keep them there.

Pride in adversity grew alongside bitterness and anger at those who yielding to one-off bonus payout bribes or sheer despair, were welcomed to the arms of government propaganda and excluded from their communities. The government was clear no resource would be spared to reward and protect the scabs.

Hit Squads and the 'Democracy' debate.

Hostility on picket lines had hardened, there was anger both at the scabs bussed in boarded up transport, and against the massive and violent policing to protect them. The police themselves provoking much of this, waving their payslips showing huge overtime payments and bonuses at the penniless strikers.

We distributed posters and leaflets with the George Orwell quote from *Homage to Catalonia*: "When I see an actual flesh-and-blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask myself which side I am on." And we felt it!

With picket line battles static and predictable, guerrilla style actions began to spread across the coalfields. Where pits were located near large towns where strikes and scabs shared the same neighbourhoods, this moved beyond shunning or shaming in the streets to graffiti, vandalising houses and sabotage to police vehicles and cars.

In many of the more isolated pit villages focused almost entirely on the mine, scabs were driven from their homes or moved to safety. This combined with the arrest and banishment hollowed out small villages like Fitzwilliam in West Yorkshire leaving streets of empty houses. Misty early morning picket lines took on a surreal air against the back drop of growing ghost towns.

The formation of groups of strikers for more wide-ranging actions, soon to be dubbed 'hit squads' was a more subtle affair. Anecdotal gatherings in small clandestine affinity groups. Planning actions in secret and preserving anonymity.

These took actions sabotaging coal stocks; highways and access routes; firing scab buses in their depots and disabling police vehicles. Most famously, targeting scabs in their strike-breaking taxis on their way to work from road and motorway bridges.

Such actions were not universally supported but nor were their targets generally mourned - but it was a break with communal consensus and decision making that had grown in the communities of struggle. Questions arose about democracy, accountability and reputational damage - after all is a victim still a victim when they strike back?

It was inevitably utilised for propaganda purposes demonising thuggish strikers against honest working miners (scabs). The Labour Party wanted law!

The TUC wanted order! The 'Left' meanwhile wanted them both to get off their knees and call the general strike!

NACODS again: Never mind the ballots

The democracy debate could have taken a different direction when a second ballot of the - crucial for safety - Pit Deputies union took place in September. The failure in April, despite a majority, to reach the requisite 2/3rds for strike action stipulated by its constitution had let the union leadership of the hook and enable working and struggling pits to legally function.

On this occasion a resounding 83% voted in support of industrial action and closing the mines down. Well beyond constitutional requirements. Strike action was planned for the following month but cancelled in a leadership betrayal declaring that new concessions by the government's puppet, the NCB, had resolved their grievances invalidating the initial call for the ballot!

Neither press nor establishment outrage followed the crushing of this democratic exercise. The strike was cancelled - we reeled but absorbed the shock. We perhaps were less surprised than most by the failure of 'democracy's' magic bullet. Strikers recoiled in disbelief. Quietly, that night, the windows of our local NACODs offices were put through I recall hearing.

Democracy and Militancy

The hypocrisy of the democratic arguments in the Miners' Strike were echoing throughout the revolutionary milieu. The hit squads were raising the ante as well as morale, even if only in a pyrrhic sense. The escalating sabotage and anti-scab actions of the hit squads increasingly became the focus of anti-strike

propaganda, and a key subject of abuse while agitating and collecting on the streets.

The fact that the tactics of militant extension hadn't been democratically decided, nor the participants themselves chosen or elected became a new rod to beat around the bush of legitimacy.

The strikers were on the back foot for all to see. The leading right wing tabloid newspaper the Daily Mail was promoting (paying for) Chris Butcher, a Bevercotes Colliery scab better known as 'Silver Birch', on a national scab recruitment tour, and to take action in the courts against the legality of the NUM's conduct and finance. He became the establishment's rallying point antihero.

Paradoxically in many ways the strike was at a peak juncture. This was the high point of class struggle in the UK in the '80's. Society was polarised, the strikers had widespread sympathy but not enough material solidarity from the rest of the class, pacified by their cowering bureaucracies. Was it to be the class war's 'last hurrah' before the final defeat of the last great wave of the '70's?

Democracy, Minorities, and Revolution

What was the role of clear-sighted minorities in the peak of struggle or verging on defeat? To acquiesce to a silent majority? For us the question was more profound - should it heed calls for restraint from a vocal majority or continue showing a leadership of ideas and praxis?

This debate of course was larger, and perhaps outside realistic parameters of the class struggle at that moment. It indicated however the need to examine

the principles that guide the organisation and action of revolutionary minorities.

For all the courage the mining communities had shown and the support and solidarity of the thousands that had rallied to them, it was by no means of revolutionary event. It continued to be rooted in defensive sectoral and economic demands. We had no illusion otherwise, but that did not mean the living experience of our class in struggle didn't have everything to teach us.

We in Careless Talk, along with Wildcat and other comrades wanted a critique of democracy and majorities that went beyond the principled rejection of bourgeois parliamentarianism. What, when push comes to shove, are the limits and relationship of democratic form over revolutionary content? This was what was playing out in front of us in this Petri dish of a limited industrial sector struggle.

We had long before abandoned the concept of 'all power to the Workers Councils' for its obvious sequitur, 'all power to the revolutionary Worker's Councils'. The dark experience of the German revolution of 1918 had shown that non-revolutionary workers' councils can hand power to counter revolutionary governments and workers get slaughtered.

While recognising the importance of distinguishing between farsighted minorities within the class struggle and substitutionist vanguard opportunism from outside it, content must trump form in every context. Hollowed out forms were the fig leaf of Social Democratic dictatorship both in Bolshevik form and in Germany.

It was as we felt it was, for us to commit to the role of the hit squads as the most militant expression of the strike at this point and to vocally support their actions and its extension across the front lines of the conflict.

Republicanism on the picket line

Perhaps the nadir for the NUM was the sequestration of its funds in the October High Court case, but I can't help feel it was overshadowed by another event - the potential nadir of Margaret Thatcher.

In the early hours of October 12th, a bomb went off in the Grand Hotel in Brighton, on the eve of the closing of the annual conference of the ruling Conservative Party. The top floors of the hotel collapsed into the centre killing one MP amongst four other party apparatchiks.

For a while, the whereabouts of Margaret Thatcher herself, ensconced there with the rest of her government, was unknown. It looked initially like a success for the audaciousness of the Irish nationalists of the claimant IRA.

For a brief moment there could not have been less joy in the ghettos of the oppressed than when the architect of South African apartheid Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd was assassinated in Parliament in 1966!

As revolutionary anarchist communists we do not support terrorism and we know well that changing the face of capital changes nothing. That doesn't mean we can't afford to raise a smile when one of the bastards gets it!

Spoiler alert: Thatcher survived unharmed and in a veritable tour de force went on to close the conference that morning, adding the veneer of invincibility to her armoury.

We had been to an event in Leeds and were distributing and collecting on the streets that day. The response of passers by was quite incredible. Half the people we engaged with would say “we nearly got her hey?”, the other half would accuse us of supporting the IRA and by extension were to blame along with miners.

For weeks to come an inexplicable conversion to Irish nationalism seemed to have taken place on the picket lines as the miners and supporters chanted “I-I-IRA!” Go figure.

Feminism on the picket line

That women played such a significant role in the strike has already been alluded to. Industrial struggles particularly of this time were often seen as primarily a men’s prerogative. A more detailed description follows in a Wildcat article as an appendix to this account.

That it should be seen in the mining areas is perhaps a little less surprising. As the grandson of generations of Welsh miners, I am well aware of the authority that women carried in the household and in the community. At the start though it was the men on the picket lines, flying pickets, mass picketing and meetings.

It didn’t take long however to realise that like any frontline, the struggle needed many times the resources behind it to maintain it. Initially this was seen as the role of the NUM and some of the opposition that arose as women stepped in is detailed in the appendix.

The strike was nearly a year long and in hindsight it seems inevitable that roles became less fixed, adaptable, interchangeable. For morale, community

cohesion, and to stave off exhaustion. The women of the mining communities weren't simply looking after children and home while their children's future was thrown away and their homes were in danger.

Very early on women stepped up to help enforce the strike in their streets, to prepare the resources to support the frontline, to talk and agitate and organise and demonstrate. Beyond that they actively sought to participate with the men and as the strike progressed went on to play an important part on the picket lines themselves.

It didn't take long to discover that women participating in the picket lines, or even simply being THE picket on occasion confronted the police with challenges they didn't know how to handle. This became more important as men became more scarce due to prison, banishment, injury or other court orders.

Not just the role but the self-concept and perception of women in the community inevitably transformed in the conflict. Of men too, many needing support in prison or care due to disability. Not just in recipient roles but in activity too. If women were to march, speak and picket, men had to take on greater childcare responsibilities.

This role became more important as the longer the strike became, the more of a crisis there was in the schools in the mining areas. Conflicts spread to the class room. Punishments, bullying, exclusions, even strikes increased the number of non-attendees. This was to have ramifications long after the strike which I will explore later.

Two key examples come to mind that illustrate this change. One was the increasing number of women I knew who remained active in the strike after

their husbands returned to work. The other was at a fundraising gig at the Miners Welfare Club in Silverdale at the end of the year...

Class Act

The variety cabaret show was organised and funded by the now infamous 'Trotskyist to the Stars' Workers Revolutionary Party. The WRP had made a big impact in the actors' union Equity and had some big names on their books. Their star turn was comedian Bill Tarmey, better known as 'Jack Duckworth' in the hit soap Coronation Street.

I remember the anticipation of this much needed solidarity and light relief in a half empty club at a colliery where the strike was haemorrhaging back to work. Bill's arrival on stage and initial words of solidarity were greeted rapturously with cheers and applause. Then came the traditional old style 'Working Men's Club' routine.

A rising barrage of jokes and innuendo aimed largely at women floating from the stage along the lines of: 'Women drivers am I right..? You know when your wife's nagging...? Dumb blondes... My mother in law...' Nobody laughed as groans turned to jeers and boos. Then a shout of 'get off' raised the chants of 'Off! Off! Off!' The Party in Silverdale was over.

Even the people there were amazed themselves recalling how only a year ago they probably would've found that really funny. But times had changed. As Mal Finch's 1984 song 'Women of the Working Class', an anthem of 'Women Against Pit Closures' put it:

"Where women's liberation failed to move, this strike has mobilised!".

Fitzwilliam

“There were regular pitched battles between police and pickets. It was beginning to resemble West Belfast!” Fitzwilliam miner.

In early November, we got a positive response to our request to visit a renowned hotbed of militant resistance to ferocious police violence, the West Yorkshire pit village of Fitzwilliam. Three of us went up via Sheffield to pick up a comrade from another group. We planned to stay four days or so if all was OK with our hosts.

We received a very warm welcome. Our hosts were part of a large extended and proudly Irish family very well respected in the village. A local leadership established very much by example.

A month after Orgreave, where one of their comrades had been seriously injured, there had been a violent police riot against the Fitzwilliam picket. Many were injured, beaten up in police vans and 9 had been arrested, including an absent member of the hosts' family. It was their oldest son present - himself so badly injured that he had been allowed to return home, who was effectively the arbiter of our visit.

We were fed and well briefed on the local history, then billeted in a house vacated by a scab. We were also invited to attend a meeting of welcome at the miners' social which if I recall rightly they called the Labour Club.

We were delighted if a little trepidatious. This was a very challenging moment to me! I was not just about to 'out' myself and others as queer in a hall full of striking miners, but as anti-Labour, anti-union and critical of the leadership of their much revered Arthur Scargill.

My comrades had nominated me to give the expected response and it is perhaps for that reason it is seared in my mind! They knew we were anarchists but not sure what that meant other than that we didn't support the IRA - a rolling theme of jest and jibe.

Our host led us through the foreboding silhouette of a silent mining village swirling in a bitter November mist. At the club we then weaved our way through a seated crowd of around 60 people, mostly men if I remember right. He then opened with a speech of introduction along the following lines:

'As supporters of our strike we welcome you to Fitzwilliam so long as you do what you're told and follow our lead. We don't know yet whether you are good lefties or bad lefties and we've seen a lot! So long as you remember that this is OUR strike and you are here on our terms. If you behave yourselves and don't criticise the strike or the Union, I'm sure we'll all get along just fine'.

Laughter and groans of agreement followed, and then the invitation to introduce ourselves. We hadn't drafted anything but knew there was no value to our visit unless we could be honest and transparent no matter what the outcome. Respect and clarity was what we had agreed. It was my turn and remember it well:

"Thank you for your welcome. We have no idea whether you will see us as good lefties or bad lefties but we are not here to preach or deceive or to tell anyone how to run a strike. But we should be clear that we have a vested interest in its outcome .

"We are not here to lick your arses because you are striking miners. Most of us are queer, unemployed, poor and under attack. Much of what you have experienced here has been experienced in our communities for years.

“We are here to share our struggles in solidarity with yours because if you win, our lives get better, and if you lose, our lives get worse. And if we have something we think or want to say about this strike or your union we will do you the honour and courtesy of telling you to your face.”

To our surprise and joy we got a rapturous enthusiastic round of cheers and applause followed by a raucous rendition of an Irish republican song! In being invited to sing one back we launched into Tom Robinson’s queer anthem ‘Glad to be Gay’. The opening lyrics could not have been more poignant and the resonance they struck was clear:

“The British Police are the best in the world
I don’t believe one of these stories I’ve heard
’Bout them raiding our pubs for no reason at all
Lining the customers up by the wall
Picking out people and knocking them down
Resisting arrest as they’re kicked on the ground
Searching their houses and calling them queer
I don’t believe that sort of thing happens here!”

We taught them to sing it! Our relationship continued to deepen, and as we left after 5 days of pickets, partying and practical joking, the youngest son of our hosts sent us on our way saying they were renaming the club the anarchist centre - I doubt they did but still...

Labour Pains - Scargill v. Kinnock

Later in November, Neil Kinnock, the leader of Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition Labour Party finally agreed to what would be the first, last and only meeting of

the strike with NUM leader Arthur Scargill. The pregnant silence broke 9 months late.

To our surprise, it was on our turf at the Kings Hall in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent. Neither our class in general nor the miners in particular owed Labour anything. Their shameless avoidance could not last long after their autumn conference and this would be a media spectacle.

At relatively short notice we put out a call for as many comrades as possible to come from around the country and make our presence felt. Our aim was to get in and disrupt this stage-managed rally. A high expectation for a venue holding around 1,300 people.

About 40 comrades arrived from every part of the islands. Hitching was the anarcho-superhighway of the day and most significant groups had someone present.

The Farce and the Furious

We hadn't planned on it being a ticketed event and ended up in large knot of anarchism hatching one crazy plan after another to breach the intense security. Unbelievably a light appeared from a janitor's side door largely hidden from view and we went for it. 50 plodding comrades navigating a maze of unguarded winding corridors finally directing us to the main chamber.

As we eagerly turned a corner we were met by a sole cleaner with a mop and bucket who furiously spied our dirty, largely army surplus, boots. She took control immediately and within 5 minutes, the cream of British anarchism had been literally swept out the way we came. Thank God we weren't those type of communists who had no sense of irony!

As it happened the meeting was a little undersubscribed and while some local Trotskyists were busy making the next day's front page in a punch up over a bundle of papers (The Next Step and Socialist Worker), we were cordially invited in to take up seats in the balcony - a prime location.

The place was crowded, NUM stewarding was intense. We sat as a largely unnoticed block having decided to hold fire, only intervening when the Labour leader got to to speak. Which he did giving one good cue after another for raucous retort. It was impressive.

The aisle stairway filled with angry stewards but we presented too much of a formidable and cohesive entity for any of them to risk intervening. I remember one steward shouting to another "You get him!", pointing to one of our number. After a second thinking about it, he responded "No way, YOU get him!" We were secure.

Kinnock was successfully disrupted throughout his cringing hypocritical address, pausing constantly to address and challenge his haranguers on high. While the TV and radio microphones did not pick up our intervention from the balcony, the footage clearly showed a derailed and frustrated Kinnock pausing constantly in recognition.

We managed to depart safely and without further incident, except for picking up an elderly woman's Mini trapped between two union limousines and placing it in the road from where she could depart.

Despite being the primary billet for dozens of anarchists, that night, our glass front door got smashed.

University of Life

Somewhere around this time (the exact chronology is difficult to pin down), the local university students' union at Keele was to debate a motion to ban promotion of the strike and related fundraising as 'Ultra Vires'. The motion put forward by the Federation of Conservative Students (FCS) was part of a conservative defunding campaign described above.

We had allies and affiliates on campus and although barred on the one hand, I had been awarded life membership of Keele Students Union and so was able to contribute to defending both the principle and the benefit to campaigning there.

The meeting on the 19th was perhaps the busiest I had ever seen and was deeply polarised and mutually antagonistic. Some local miners from Silverdale and even a couple of Hucknall strikers from Nottinghamshire with student siblings there, came with us and galvanised and provoked in equal measure.

At the debates peak, the FCS leader, (deadnaming me as a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain!) claimed that when challenged by him, I had refused to condemn the use of violence by striking miners. I had to resort to bureaucratic procedural 'points of order' to gain access to the microphone stating first the obvious "is it not a fact that I am not a member of the CPGB but a revolutionary anarchist communist?" to jeers and cheers.

Agreeing that, I followed with "is it not a fact that I did not say I refused to condemn the violence of striking miners but instead, condone it and support its use and extension across the coalfields against the violence of scabs and the police occupation". The room erupted with both sides lunging, throwing

beer and insults leading to a short recess before the vote. The FCS motion and consequent ban were resoundingly defeated.

Merthyr Vale South Wales

On the last day of November, a Welsh taxi driver died in when a brick was dropped from a road bridge while he was transporting strike breakers to cross picket lines.

Whatever views one holds on the risks scabbing must take to break strikes, it was a disaster. Strikers too had died in the conflict but one would struggle to find the fuss. Nonetheless, December began with an iconically bleak Christmas ahead.

Harder Times

A desperate winter loomed and returns to work increased. We continued the occasional picket, in our area return was turning into a rout. Hardship was at times total and unbearable. There were suicides. Bribes and bonuses offered the blackmailers way out - 'you can choose to end this suffering now.'

We continued to 'Switch on at 6'; agitate and collect. The truth was that things had got so bad many just didn't want to talk or engage about it. Responses in the street had turned more to sympathy and union blaming than the government. A kind of exasperation and 'for god's sake haven't they had enough.

There was still a blitz spirit - humour in adversity. Those holding out were vocal in their determination, those knowing they couldn't kept quiet. Many we

had met over the late summer had evolved a certain fatalist optimism. 'I don't care how the strike ends but I know I'm never going down a filthy pit again and nor are my kids'. Enduring, holding out together, had for some become an end in itself. It bred stoic resilience.

Everyone knew, the coal stocks weren't going to run out over winter. Everyone now knew that the government had prepared for this years in advance. Everyone felt we were counting week by week. Every day was in some way a victory. But miners weren't just hungry, they were freezing too. Families, sometimes including children, were scrabbling on slag heaps and by railways for little bits of coal they could get.

The Last Picket

Strikers were now almost solely dependent on donations. Coal stocks and deliveries were protected by a national army of police and Christmas had finally broken the back of the strike. The government gloated, news showed the returns to work every day giving increasing numbers of those returning. The strike was ending before our eyes.

On March 3, to preserve dignity and cohesion a small majority of coalfield deputies, despite mass lobbying for the contrary, voted for an orderly return to begin on March 5th.

In truth, when the news came through, I like many others wept and wept with pride as well as sadness. We had committed fully and the experience of hope and solidarity could not be taken away.

On the last picket before the banners and bands were to march to the pit gates, we didn't sleep for the early start. Around 4 am we traipsed through

deep snow for the hour or so it took to reach the picket line. Sadness and pride. The final return took place on the anniversary - the strike was over.

Aftermath

In the last few weeks of the strike, the Orwellian triumph had been the creation of a new trade union to rival the NUM. Founded by the groomed scabs of government, big business and the media just before New Year to great fanfare, the Union of 'Democratic' Mineworkers signaled from Nottinghamshire the end of the industry's future.

In the desolation of the year that followed there were moments of inspiration that surfaced and incidents of opportunist repression. Both consequences and completions of the last major defeat of our class in recent times.

During the strike, schools throughout the coal regions had shared in the disruption as already alluded to. For a year they had seen their families and communities' standing fall, from a relatively prosperous 'backbone' of the economy to an impoverished 'enemy within' surviving on handouts.

Over 300,000 children and young people were traumatised and resentful of false hope, arbitrariness and authority. And just plain angry at what they had experienced. Now, having begun initially in Yorkshire towns like Barnsley and Sheffield, this disruption instead of abating permeated and spread.

The assault on workers, increasing poverty and unemployment raised in the consciousness of the students the futility of a schooling that seemed to only prepare for unemployment, rule taking or acquiescence. This culminated in April in a national walk out of school students across the UK.

We in Careless Talk had finally merged with Wildcat at this juncture of the end of the Miners' strike and the slow rumble of conflict in the schools. The subject of 'schooling' versus education was an ongoing focus we had brought with us.

National School Strikes April '85

Several issues segued into rising conflict in the schools. In addition to a sense of anger and futility was the government's imposition the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), a low wage universal compulsory work programme targeted at school leavers.

The Trotskyite Leninoids of the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS - a 'Militant' front), the SWP, along with others, tried to harness this for their 'Right To Work' fronts. They also demanded school students support the teachers in sporadic strikes for better conditions. Amongst the teachers demands was more control on discipline in the class room! Teachers' pickets weren't for the student revolt but chanting "Scum Out - Teachers In!"

For us, asking school students in this environment to support their teachers was like asking prisoners to support their screws. These 'soft-cops' didn't need a truncheon when towering over a seven-year-old!

We weren't arguing that they weren't workers, but were compromised as a repressive arm of the state. Teachers should be supported when they unconditionally supported the students in their revolt against the repression of schooling.

Following an early April walk-out in Scotland, on April 25th, hundreds of thousands played truant with 250,000 coming out on the streets in

demonstrations up and down the country. Amongst all of the actions, only two places saw serious disruption, Stoke and Stafford.

These were where we were involved, distributing leaflets drawing all these themes together saying: "Fuck School! Fuck Work! Fuck LPYS! - Dole is poverty; Work is Slavery. One solution: Revolution!"

The compulsory YTS plans were eventually abandoned. Following one arrest, breach of the peace and obscenity charges were pressed against us.

Stonehenge: Battle of the Bean Field June '85.

The New Age traveller communities comprised many veterans and counter cultural activists who had come from a generation of the hinterlands of radicalism and resistance. Since the late '60s they had been disparate tribes that came together a few times a year, known collectively as 'The (peace) Convoy', for major festival events. The pinnacle of these was the three-week free festival celebration of the solstice at Stonehenge in Wiltshire.

They had played a role at 'Stop The City' during the strike, bringing a number of obsolete buses to major road junctions and abandoning them, dropping their keys down drains. At the 13th Stonehenge festival for the solstice that year they had successfully organised a three-week festival under the banner of 'Pig Free State' with about 30,000 attendees. Myself and other comrades included. They represented if nothing else a cultural antithesis of establishment normality.

Whilst controversy had occasionally visited the solstice festival in the last 13 years, the festival itself had been largely unchallenged. In 1985 however, a

14th consecutive festival could have established it's right in perpetuity under English common law. This was Thatcher's time to act.

The gathering was banned. The state used all its coalfield tactics of blockages, diversions and mass policing to corral and surround the 600 members of the convoy by twice as many riot police in the Beanfield. After several hours of assault on the unarmed travellers, all vehicles were disabled and smashed up. One death, which could not be 'directly attributed' to the event occurred among the travellers. The era of travelling and rights to free festivals was ended.

Urban Insurrections

By late summer, the working class centres of urban Britain were in their sixth year bearing the brunt of an austerity driving job losses, benefit cuts, impoverishment, and scapegoating by virtue of diversity - primarily race. They were being policed as urban ghettos. Millions had become unemployed, they were blamed for it and benefits were cut.

The background was hot, not cold. Everyone had seen the year of the miners' strike! In late summer urban insurrections arose in scores of towns and cities, hundreds. From the south east of England to its north-west, to Wales and Scotland, protests, demonstrations and rioting took place. We were in London at one point and took French comrades to see what was going on.

In some cities like London, Liverpool and Birmingham (Brixton, Toxteth, Handsworth), whole districts were lost to government control for days. That period of September to October has been described as 'like a summer with 1000 Julys' or as a 'carnival of the oppressed' for the spirit of freedom and

solidarity that briefly reigned. Rebellion shone and was extinguished but not without deaths on both sides.

On the last days of the Liverpool riots the police were given free range to unleash violence as the last chance before the army would be called in. It was perhaps the most dangerous urban situation for any government since the turn of the century. Thatcher's commitment to social silencing however proved total.

Terrorism

By the years end an opportunity was either created or exploited by the state to round up hundreds of militants from the anarchist/communist milieu, providing an incredible opportunity for intelligence gathering.

Allegedly, though disavowed by every animal rights activist I knew, a series of (deliberately unviable as we later found out) explosive devices had been left outside homes of four academic vivisection and experimental researchers. Many of us were amongst the roundups taken into custody across the country.

Trialing new anti-terrorist legislation, we were held for three days incommunicado before our houses were raided and searched – needless to say with no result beyond seizing our substantial collections of literature.

What was interesting from the interrogations was the involvement of Special Branch as well as local police, and discovery that they had copies of almost everything we had ever produced! They proved to be clearly more paranoid about us than we had ever been about them.

We waited for six months for potential charges and investigations to be dropped, and the return of boxes of our diaries and personal property. I've not kept a diary since.

For me the Miners' Strike was about its year and consequence. I don't think the events of 1985 would have happened had the defeat of that strike had not been total.

Epilogue

This has been a recollection not a balance sheet. What side we were on and what we made of it is hopefully clear, for all its naivety and capacity we did not yet possess.

It's not an analysis of losses or gains. The victor was clear and the consequences documented in one or other partisan form for 40 years.

I apologise to all and any for detail or names wronged in my recounting. I claim complete ownership of my pride in my involvement that period. What remains an enduring impact for me is the experience that class struggle changes people.

The lessons the 'Left' drew were administrative and all about leadership. They pushed the lessons that the TUC can't be trusted, that Labour Party is not a friend of our class while continuing to try and infiltrate and take over both. Political memories of that sort of thing are relatively short-lived.

What those involved will not unlearn is what it feels like to break with the normality of life under capitalism and, the experience of genuine community

and solidarity. This for me was the highpoint. The key point. It continues to point the way forward.

Appendix:

Miners! Learn from your wives!

Thousands of women are playing a vital supporting role in mining areas. Without this involvement initiated by the women themselves miners would have been in a far weaker position to fight. As a woman canteen worker at Parkside pit said: "it mustn't be forgotten that this strike wouldn't have lasted more than three months without the self sacrifice of the miners' wives and the participation of thousands of women in support groups".

However, many NUM branches have refused to give money to the kitchens. Women from Fitzwilliam in Yorkshire say that they haven't had a penny from the union.

Other branches have tried to impose strict conditions on the way money is used in the kitchens, to make sure the women know who's boss. Women from Upton Miners support Group refused NUM money. They said "they wanted to give a donation on condition that they had to say in the menu! But we are answerable to nobody!". At Tower Lodge in Hirwaun, Wales, NUM officials insisted that £100 collected by the women had to go to them instead. A miners wife told how "it's like working with the Mafia. Terry Thomas (Vice President of South Wales NUM) came chasing after the money, and I wouldn't be surprised if Neil Kinnock wasn't far behind".

When women want to go beyond the kitchen sink and go picketing, they have had an even harder time of it. At Wistow colliery miners themselves organised a picket of the local power station, inviting all their supporters along. A miner described what happened: "The NUM officials came down and told us to leave because the pickets had not been organised by the NUM and not all the pickets were NUM members. They also told the female pickets to get back to the soup kitchens 'where they belonged'. One official went over to the police lines, inviting them to deal with us as they wished, because we were nothing to do with the NUM". This shows which side the NUM is on!

Militant women want more than to be allowed on the picket line. They want a say in running the strike. But despite their support and involvement the wives and families of miners are not allowed into meetings to discuss the strikes strategy and tactics. It is vital that everyone who is actively supporting the strike is treated as equal in taking decisions about what to do and how to conduct it. Women from a Welsh pit village were told why they were banned from strike committee meetings – they had criticised the running of the strike, whereas the men were afraid to criticise "their own" leaders.

Why are union officials so hostile to women becoming more actively involved in the strike? This demand challenges the very heart of trade unionism. For once you let the miners' wives into the branch meetings, and elect them onto strike committees, a precedent is established. Once non-miners are allowed to fully participate in the strike, the way is open for more and more people to be drawn into the struggle until what you have is no longer a trade union dispute but a mass strike! In this situation, union leaders would lose any special claim to authority. They recognise this threat to their power. They are afraid of women activists who bluntly refuse to do what they tell them. No wonder they tell the women to "get back to the kitchens".

Women's Pickets

Women who want to go picketing have met other problems. If they are the wives of militant miners who have already been arrested, they are reluctant to risk arrest as well, especially with children to look after. There is no reason why this should be organised by women, men on strike should take their share of caring for the children and let the women go picketing. Not just because everyone should be involved, but also women make very good pickets. For many it is their first experience of a picket line but they know what to do.

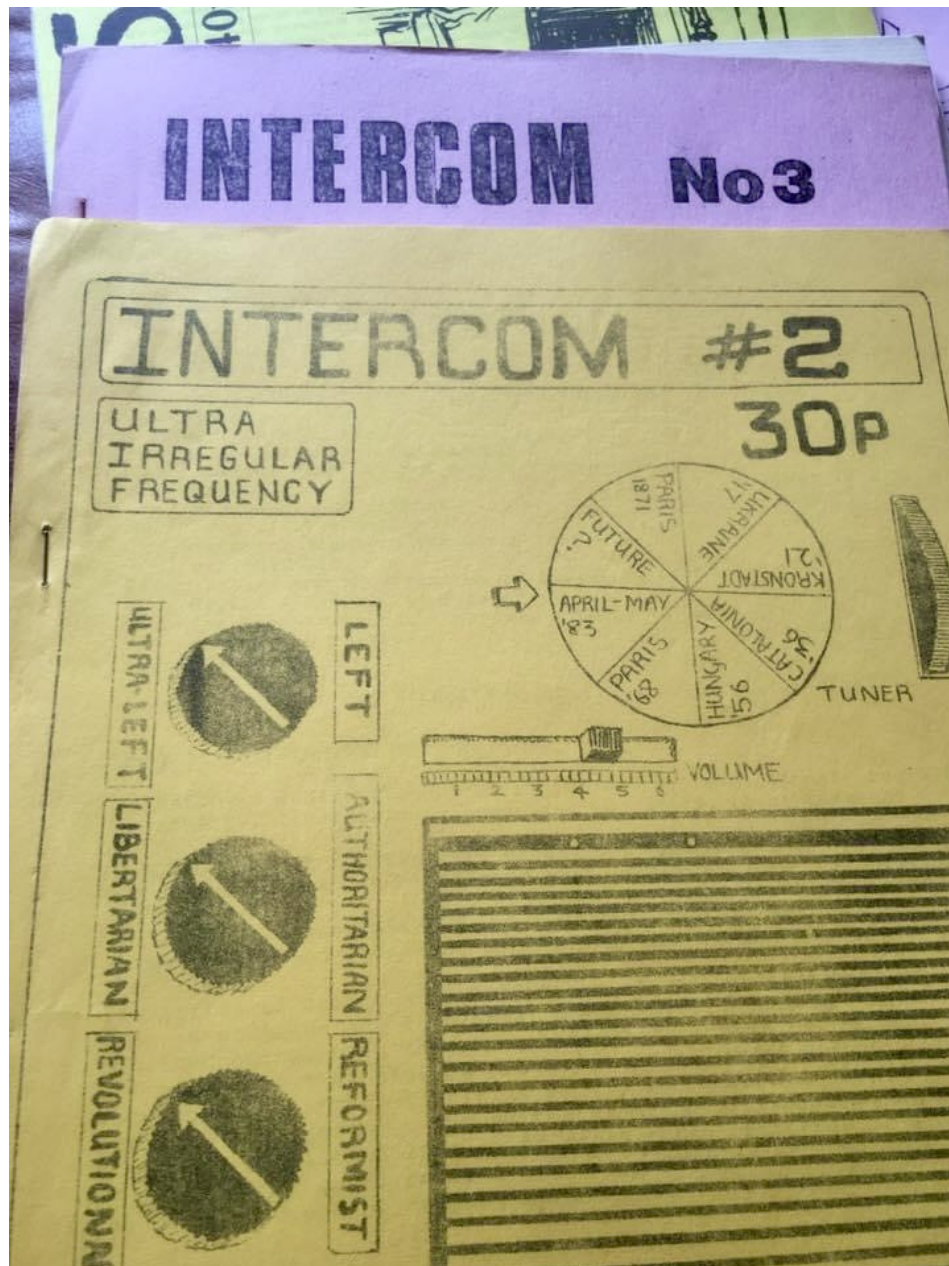
A women's picket of Sutton Manor pit in Lancashire where I was present, stood out in contrast to the usual picket line ritual of a few shouts and people generally not knowing what's going on. We discussed beforehand what we wanted to do and despite being heavily outnumbered by the police we did give them a run for their money. And they hated it! They just couldn't think of enough sexist insults to fling at us there was a feeling of solidarity and collectivity that comes from struggling together. Without the union leaders and union traditions to tell them how to behave, which the men have, women are able to simply do what they decide to be done.

Wildcat does not support the aims of the Greenham movement, but pickets can learn from their organisation. The women at Greenham Common in 1982 and 1983 had no officials to say what they could do. They organised several hundred people around an 11 mile perimeter fence at night keeping one step ahead of the police by using walkie-talkie radios, organising actions through group delegates to small central planning meetings making sure that all participants knew what was going on and everyone playing their part, however small.

What people involved in the miners' strike have learnt, that the Greenham women never did, is the need to respond to state violence with our own violence. As one miner's wife puts it: "I've always respected the police, but I'll tell you what, I'll watch a Bobby being kicked to death in the street in the future and I'll walk across to the other side. They show their true colours now."

Far from being the weakest section of the working class, unable to fight back against the bosses' onslaught because they are marginalised, women have shown time and again that it is their very lack of involvement in the organisations which hold men back, that enables them to organise themselves and carry out their own decisions and actions. This puts them at the forefront of working class struggle. If miners are to win, they must learn from their wives and mothers, girlfriends and daughters.

Wildcat, Autumn 1984



Everything the Kate Sharpley Library have put online about the Miners Strike can be found at <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/93207x>

[Updated Oct. 2024, Brighton bombing was at the end of the Tory party conference not the beginning.]