

Women Against Pit Closures' 1984-5



A short history of the Women Against Pit Closures Movement during the 1984-85 Miners Strike

The 1984-85 British Miners' Strike saw the formation of 'Women Against Pit Closures' groups, organising not only strike-oriented activities, support and community needs provision, but who also came to act autonomously as women's groups around gendered interests. Women involved attest to the transformative role of the organisation and strike on their own political lives; 'The strike was worth millions to me. Our women's group will continue to flourish. It will go on. We suddenly found out that there was life after marriage, we have taken a political step forward in a year, and formed friendships that most women would take a lifetime to achieve, and we don't intend to go back into the background. Our husbands don't want us to either (even though some of them have been heard to pray, 'Please give us back our wives'). We have made a mark in this town, we've made a space for ourselves in this world, and we fully intend to keep it. As a matter of fact we're going to make an even bigger space, or go down trying' (Miller, 1986, p. 29).¹

The Miners' Strike was arguably the most important industrial stoppage since the General Strike of 1926, comprising a loss of around 38 million working days.² The strike was given an avowedly political edge due to the role played by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in attacking the publically owned mines. The government believed that the power of the NUM had to be broken,³ and launched the 'Ridley Report', which tabled a number of recommendations to deal with a mining strike, including hiring non-Unionised lorry drivers, adapting power stations to burn oil and coal and increasing coal stocks.⁴ A strike was provoked at a time favourable to the government; shortly after re-election, and at a time of high coal stocks.⁵

As women could not be miners,⁶ they could not be members of the NUM, meaning that the decision to strike had been taken without them,⁷ and many decisions throughout the strike continued to be made without the input of women.⁸ Men often saw it as 'our industry, our union, and our fight', and women therefore found it difficult to get on the agenda of the union.⁹ However, it has been said that the 'maintenance of the strike owed more to the emergence of the women's groups than to any other single factor'.¹⁰ Initially, women began organising soup kitchens and providing welfare advice, organising and distributing food parcels,¹¹ and helping with utilities companies and the council.¹² They found that writing to companies as a group meant they carried more weight than if those letters were written by individuals.¹³ Women said that 'we felt this practical help was of real value to the communities facing

economic deprivation and it also gave us an opportunity to pass on our support directly to the miners and their families'.¹⁴ One group told of how, after being denied use of the village hall, they occupied it for five days, until they were allowed use of the school kitchens.¹⁵ Barnsley WAPC set up a crèche for the children of the women involved in the community kitchen so that child care was not an issue.¹⁶

This sort of action gained respect from the men, as they could see the hard work of the women and the results this brought.¹⁷ The women's movement emerged with such vigour and energy that 'the miners would have found it hard to give up their strike even if they had wanted to'.¹⁸ Essential to such activities was fund-raising, as NUM funds went to pay for pickets.¹⁹ Therefore, in order to fund the kitchens and parcels, money had to be raised in numerous ways; from jumble sales and raffles, to sponsored walks,²⁰ collections and market stalls.²¹ Barnsley WAPC tell of how their group formed a few months into the strike, when a small group of women decided to write to the local paper and profess their support and to ask other like-minded women to get in contact.²² Many felt that the media was portraying women as being against the strike and felt they had to show their support and challenge the notion that families were anti-strike.²³

Women found they 'had untold enthusiasm, and energy, and it seemed at the time as though there wasn't enough outlet for our talents. We wanted to do something more important. We had made our way, slowly and quietly, politically, but now we needed more contact with the men and the things that they were doing'.²⁴

November 1984 saw women joining the picket line as miners began breaking the strike.²⁵ Women who had heard stories of picket lines and police violence,²⁶ but were determined to get involved in the frontline of the 'class war'.²⁷ Some of the women report that they never thought that they would stand on a picket line, but enjoyed it when they did.²⁸ Women had to struggle against NUM branch officials, who often told them they could not picket as they were not insured,²⁹ and others sceptical about the presence of women on the picket line. However, the women's presence soon became a morale boost for the men.³⁰ Indeed women often outnumbered men on the picket lines,³¹ and were often subject to violence and intimidation,³² as well as arrest.³³ The sexism of the police meant the women were subject to taunts, gestures and comments suggesting they were 'lesbians' and 'whores', and asked if they wanted to earn £5 in the police van.³⁴

Women also began attending and speaking at support events. For women who, on the whole, had never done anything like this, the transformative effects of activism were clear.³⁵ Women tell of how at first scripts were written by men, but that women soon started to write their own, or speak without a script.³⁶ One woman tells of the pride felt at addressing her first rally; 'it was unbelievable: this ordinary woman who liked to sit in the house knitting, was now going to speak in public'.³⁷

WAPC organised rallies in Barnsley and London, as well as countless others. The Barnsley Women's Rally, on May 12th 1984, was an all-women affair to celebrate the role that women were playing in the miners' strike.³⁸ Around 10000 women attended,³⁹ and women speakers took to the stage alongside Arthur Scargill.⁴⁰ The speakers talked about gendered involvement in the strike and the limited notion of emancipation that many of the men held,⁴¹ showing that gender had become an essential aspect of women's involvement in the strike. After such an important rally for women, there was widespread anger that the only pictures in the media were those of women kissing Scargill. One woman reflects on this by saying; 'It was too threatening, working class women getting organised, when we are brought up to be passive and think we have one role in life'.⁴² The London Women's rally, on 11th August 1984 was another huge gathering of activist women involved in the miners' strike, which saw between 15000 and 25000 marchers.⁴³ The women attempted to present a petition, signed by thousands of women to the Queen.⁴⁴

In the organising of Barnsley Rally, the Barnsley WAPC came in contact with parallel groups across the country, and as a consequence WAPC was as good as a national organised movement.⁴⁵ The national WAPC movement was formed officially in August 1984, after the first Women's Conference at Northern College, on July 22nd.⁴⁶ This conference had been called to discuss setting up a national body and organising a rally in London.⁴⁷ The conference was more than merely practically necessary to form a coherent organisation, but also functioned as an educative experience of autonomous organising for women.⁴⁸ The organisation was specifically female only,⁴⁹ and it was agreed that groups must contain at least 75% (100% at leadership level) miner related women, and a maximum of 25% non-miner related women.⁵⁰ As a basis for a national organisation, the movement came up with specific aims, including supporting the strike, strengthening women's organisations and establishing such organisations in all areas, promoting education for women, and maintaining a close relationship with the NUM.⁵¹

WAPC after the strike

One WAPC member argued that 'after the strike, we will have to find somewhere to channel our energy, most of us will never be able to sit at home again. We, as women, have realised the power we have to do something like this and to keep it going, day after day'.⁵² Some WAPC groups remained active despite the end of the strike:⁵³ 'Our group will go on, and stay together. It would be silly to let such a good thing go. We can't and we won't give up. We will never be destroyed: we have a fighting spirit that will last forever'.⁵⁴ Many of the women proclaimed that they could never go back to the roles they played and the lives they lead before the strike, and were determined to continue with their political activism and education beyond the strike.⁵⁵

WAPC women continued to be politically active after the strike, for example, continuing to organise and coordinate WAPC,⁵⁶ including the struggles during the 1990s against further closures,⁵⁷ as well as other political activities such as the anti-apartheid movement.⁵⁸ The Labour party was often a popular route for women to take, with some attempting to set up women's sections,⁵⁹ and others becoming candidates for the party.⁶⁰ Women often went into formal education to satisfy a desire that had grown from the practical political education they had received as activists. In South Wales, women set up the DOVE institute, as a way of pursuing further education.⁶¹ Another woman says that 'I'm considering going to Northern College and my husband agrees this will be alright'.⁶²

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