

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > Women (UK) > **UK: Women standing up for mining communities, forty years on**

UK: Women standing up for mining communities, forty years on

Saturday 23 March 2024, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 4 March 2024).

The women's groups formed to defend embattled mining communities in the 1984-85 strike marked their 40th anniversary in Durham on Saturday.

The celebration was organised by Women Against Pit Closures, which brought together the local groups that sprung up across the coalfields as the strike wore on.

The national strike started 40 years ago this week, the culmination of a tide of anger among mineworkers and their communities at the plan to shut pits, and break the National Union of Mineworkers, devised by Margaret Thatcher's Tory government.

It ended a year later, having slowed down but not stopped the pit closure programme.

The strike was a turning-point in many ways. Paramilitary police violence had been used in response to riots in predominantly black inner-city communities in 1981, but the sheer scale of the mobilisation against mining communities was unprecedented.

The Tories' vengeful assault on the mineworkers' union, which had played a central part in unseating Edward Heath's government a decade earlier, was the first of a series of hammer-blows against organised labour. Then came the neoliberal offensive that dismantled chunks of the welfare state and drove down living standards.

But the strike also transformed the labour movement. The women of mining communities were central to that.

It was no industrial dispute in the normal sense of the term, but more an existential struggle for survival, that gave rise to a movement which overflowed the bounds of traditional labour organisation.

Until 1984, support groups, organised by sections of the working class to support each other, were few and far between. In that year, they appeared everywhere: not only in mining villages, but in many other, geographically distant, communities.

On Saturday Women Against Pit Closures came together again to march from Durham cathedral, through the city centre, to an event in the students' union building. Many, perhaps most, of those present had been on the front lines in 1984-85.

The overriding theme at a rally afterwards was that, while the great strike's objective, to prevent pit closures, had not been realised, much had been gained by the movement. Women were empowered, collectively.

“The contribution of working class women to the strike can not be overstated”, Mary Foy, Labour MP for the City of Durham, said. “In the North East, women’s groups fed 5000 people a day, five days a week.”

The groups organised care for children, and ensured the supply of school uniform when the new school year began in September 1984 and Christmas presents at the end of the year.

“The groups were there to provide emotional support when things got tough, which they often did. And increasingly they had a say in the politics of the strike. When the men returned to work, the women’s groups continued.”

Foy said that in many communities, when the Covid-19 pandemic inflicted sudden hardship, those who had been active in 1984-85 revived old organising links to protect and unite.

She pointed out that in Durham, where Saturday’s event was held, traditions of solidarity and community born when coal was king are kept alive by the annual [miners’ gala](#) in July. (It is the UK’s largest labour movement festival, growing each year, more than 20 years after the last pit closed.)

Sarah Woolley of the [Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union](#), representative of a generation of activists after the 1984 veterans who led the march, said the 1984 strike could not have gone on as long as it did without the organising work by women in mining communities.

She introduced herself as the union’s first woman general secretary, and before that its first woman national officer, in its 176-year history.

Food, and access to food, is now central to the union’s activity. “In the two years after the pandemic, food bank use by our union’s members increased by 10 per cent.

“People who work in jobs feeding the nation don’t have enough money to feed themselves. They are ashamed to invite people into their homes, because they can not offer them a meal, and they don’t want people to see that there are blankets everywhere because they can not afford heating.”

Women are the ones who learn how to stretch one meal into two, and how to make the best meal out of the crappiest ingredients available from supermarkets, Woolley said.

She spoke about the emphasis now put by some trade unions on issues such as period poverty (e.g. demands for free sanitary products in the workplace), domestic violence, and the need to talk more openly about the menopause and its effects on working lives.

Woolley said that the trade union movement had to “get our own house in order”. There is no place for sexual harassment and sexual violence, she said, pointing to [the “meTU” campaign](#), set up to respond to cases of sexual harassment and bullying that union structures have failed to deal with properly.

On a personal note, I am sceptical of attempts to establish labour movement traditions. There’s always a danger that we will crystallise an ideal version of what we think we used to do, and it ends up as a cultural millstone round our necks, instead of a valuable legacy to those who come after us. (The danger grows as we get older.)

Saturday’s event largely avoided such pitfalls. The emergence of new forms of organisation – by the women of mining communities in the first instance, but not only them by any means – was unexpected, deep-going and full of liberatory potential. These changes, not always, or everywhere, or in ideal forms, outlasted the strike and the harsh years that many communities suffered

afterwards.

All that really is something to celebrate, and even 40 years later can not so easily be institutionalised, smothered with bureaucratic love or congealed into deceptive myths. The changes were achieved over long periods of years; the issues are still raw.

The more we can tell that history, and our other histories, as they really happened, the more they can become weapons in the hands of younger generations.

□ **More about 1984-85:** [a memoir of the strike](#) by the late John McCormack, pit delegate at Polmaise colliery in Scotland (I was John's "ghost writer"). Terry Brotherstone and I wrote [a political and historical account](#) of the strike in Scotland, on the 20th anniversary. I wrote about [the Durham miners gala](#), in 2011, in one of my first posts on People & Nature.

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P.S.

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