

Britain - Socialist Feminism: Hidden from history

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It is usual that for International Women's Day on March 8, this and other websites commemorate the role that women played in the Russian revolution — in celebration of which International Women's Day became a regular event. On other occasions we have looked at the role that women are playing in struggles today abroad as well as at home. In this article I am doing something a bit different — to start to celebrate the role that socialist feminists played in second wave feminism in Britain.

Contents

- [The Working Women's Charter](#)
- [Grunwicks](#)
- [The National Abortion Campaign](#)
- [Greenham](#)
- [The Miners strike](#)
- [Defeat](#)

This article is an initial step in a larger project that crystallised for me after I attended Historical Materialism 2012 in London. For the first time HM organised a feminist stream as part of its three day event — something which I strongly welcomed. The events I was able to attend in amongst other things I was doing over those days I found very interesting and inspiring — as did other people I spoke with, including those who were able to follow the whole stream.

But one thing became clear — amongst the young women present who had come to feminism in the 1980s and later, very little if anything was known about the role that socialist feminists had played in the 1970s in Britain. Feminist history in so far as it has been written at all has tended to be written either by radical feminists or by academics focusing on equality within the current system — a system which from my perspective cannot and will not ever allow women to achieve our liberation.

The second wave of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) burst onto the political scene in the late 1960s and 1970s first in North America and then Europe as part of the left — born out of the movement against the Vietnam War and inspired by the Black Power movement as well.

The women's liberation movement as a whole was consciously antisystemic — we were not just talking about reforms at the edges but a fundamental change in society. We saw ourselves as operating in alliance with other movements at an ideological level.

Those women who came into activity as feminists in Britain in particular, Europe to some extent — much less in the US — were of the left politically and often organisationally — at the same time protesting against the failure of the left either to take up and champion our demands or respect our contribution to the movement as a whole.

In Britain and some other parts of Europe socialist feminism was initially the strongest current in that movement. We developed and put forward a different vision of women's liberation than that advanced by those feminists who thought that equality under the law within the current system was enough — and at the same time than the increasingly vocal radical feminist current which saw men per se as the problem.

It is also necessary to point out that there was sometimes a tendency by socialist feminists to downplay the importance of campaigning around the question of violence against women which was mainly taken up by radical feminists. While it was correct to fight around issues that affected the gendered division of labour in the workplace — equal pay and access to free quality childcare and to understand the centrality of women's right to control our fertility to the achievement of women's liberation — in retrospect it seems extraordinary that it was only in 1978 that the women's movement agreed a demand around violence against women.

I want to emphasise that the relationship between black women and the women's liberation movement was often not straight forward despite the fact that the later took so much inspiration from Black Power. In Britain WLM groups often didn't notice when they were exclusively white — or even more pertinently discuss whether the campaigns they were taking up related to the needs of black women.

It was often left to black women to have to assert that they refused to choose between fighting sexism or racism — both were essential. Different individuals or the same individual might prioritise one at a particular moment. Those struggles, to an even greater extent than those of socialist feminists are hidden from history. [\[1\]](#)

As Jane Kelly pointed out in her 1992 article "Postmodernism and Feminism" [\[2\]](#) first published in *International Marxist Review* No 14:

"Lastly the 1980s were marked by the challenge of black women to the white-dominated women's movement. Black feminists pointed out that on many issues their experiences differed from white women. These included the family, the workplace, welfare rights, men, motherhood, abortion, sexuality and, centrally, the state. Although black women had been organizing together since at least 1973, including in several important strikes, and the first black women's conference in Britain was held in 1979, it was in the 1980s that their voice was at last heard."

"Black women were organised in caucuses within the Labour Movement, in campaigns against deportation, against religious fundamentalism, against racism and in many other ways. Central to the debate between black and white feminists has been the relation between race, gender and class and the relative weight of each. For example black women explained that sometimes they have to put aside a fight against sexism to fight with black men against racism; at other times the struggle against male domination is paramount. This, along with black women's understanding of the racist state, lead a significant proportion of black women to socialist conclusions and put black women's organization at the forefront of anti-imperialist struggles such as the campaigns against war in the Gulf."

I also want to underline that I'm mainly talking about the women's movement in Britain because that's where I have always lived and so that's where my direct political experience is. But I certainly don't want to impose one model of what feminism should or could look like.

Indeed I have learnt a great deal from feminist activists in other countries and other continents. The fact that the way movements have grown up in different places has often been very different should not be surprising to materialists. Heather Dashner's article about the women's movement in Latin

America in *International Marxist Review* 87 for example talks about the multiple identities of women in that continent as women but also as indigenous and or residents of the favelas and barrios. Here we can see strong parallels but some differences with the experience of black women in the imperialist countries themselves.

Socialist feminism drew inspiration from the experience of the early Russian Revolution — the fact that after the revolution, despite the economic difficulties and the effect of war the development of collective ways of doing things: collective living arrangements, canteens, laundries and creches which socialised a number of tasks of reproduction which had previously been seen as the responsibility of women. This took place in the context of some important legal changes; the replacement of religious marriage with civil marriage, making divorce easier to obtain, legalising abortion and homosexuality.

But with the rise of Stalinism the gains of the revolution on this front as on all others was pushed back — women were again glorified primarily as mothers and new laws which strengthened the family were introduced. Not suprisingly then the socialist feminism of second wave feminism tended to be anti-stalinist.

While socialist feminists believed — and believe — that all women suffer as a result of women's oppression in class society including under capitalism and therefore are in favour of uniting all women who want to fight against that oppression under the banner of women's liberation we also understand that it is working-class women who suffer most acutely whether it be from the lack of abortion facilities on the NHS, from sexual harrasment or from economic discrimination in the workplace. From this point of view one of our preoccupations was to make feminist ideas accessible to working-class women.

Further, while we were strongly in favour of the autonomy of the Women's Liberation movement — and of women's leadership of all the struggles against our oppression — at the same time we were also in favour of building alliances with organisations that also involved men. From the point of view of our ability to practically take forward the fight for our demands this meant two types of organisation in particular — the trade unions and the Labour Party.

Our prioritiation of the trade unions was based on the understanding that even where women were the overwhelming majority of workers in a particular factory or other workplace — or across most of an entire industry — in order to win lasting victories the solidarity of other workers would be necessary. A number of the particular moments from history that I will examine in more detail below bear that out.

The Labour Party as a site for taking forward the struggle for women's liberation will probably seem more strange to many younger feminists today — and indeed not all socialist feminists agreed in the 1970s that it was important. However many feminists were part of the left wing ferment in the Labour Party often referred to as Bennism; and the women's structures — women's sections, women's council and women's conference — were well to the left of the party as a whole during this period.

At the same time even some feminists outside the party agreed that as Labour either was the party of government or was likely to be so soon then the positions on women's situation that could be won there had a particular importance. While the women's structures were part of a fight to increase democracy within the Labour Party, it was the case that the both individual party members and affiliated trade unions had far more of a say than they do in the Labour Party today.

This then is the political context in which I will go on to examine some of the political campaigns

that socialist feminists prioritised during this political period.

The Working Women's Charter Campaign

The Working Women's Charter was drawn up by London Trades Councils in 1974. The Charter campaign linked up with women's structures in the trade union movement which had existed over a much longer period of time but which had often become rather ossified. But the changing political situation and the influence of feminist ideas on a layer of trade union activists including some women in the Communist Party led to some revitalisation.

The Charter campaign was given real life when local Charter groups were set up around the country often linking in with a spate of action by women around equal pay in particular. There had been an important strike for Equal Pay — now immortalised in the film *Made in Dagenham* — at the Ford plant in East London in 1968. In 1970 the Labour government had introduced the Equal Pay Act — but its provisions did not come into operation until 29 December 1975!

From its inception, the Charter campaign organized solidarity with strikes around Equal Pay such as those at SEI in Heywood, north of Manchester and Electrolux Luton in 1975. At Trico windscreen wiper factory in Brentford West London all 350 women working there walked out in May 1976 and after 21 weeks of continuous picketting and huge amounts of solidarity from across the labour movement the bosses were forced to cave in in what was the longest ever strike for Equal Pay.

The Charter also campaigned around other broader demands which were part of the fight for Women's Liberation. The Charter was put to TUC Congress in 1975 and defeated mainly because of its references to abortion and to campaigning for a minimum wage. The Charter campaign tried to make links with working class women struggling around their conditions at work and show them the relevance of the fight for women's liberation to their situation.

The charter read as follows:

Working Women's Charter

We pledge ourselves to agitate and organize to achieve the following demands:

1. The rate for the job regardless of sex, at rates negotiated by the trades unions, with a national minimum wage below which no wages should fall.
2. Equal opportunity of entry into occupations and in promotion regardless of sex and marital state.
3. Equal education and training for all occupations and compulsory day-release for all 16- to 19-year-olds in employment.
4. Working conditions to be, without deterioration of previous conditions, the same for women as for men.
5. The removal of all legal and bureaucratic impediments to equality, e.g. with regard to tenancies, passports, control over children, social security payments, hire purchase agreements.
6. Improved provision of local authority day nurseries, free of charge, with extended hours to suit working mothers. Provision of nursery classes in day nurseries. More nursery schools.
7. 18 weeks maternity leave with full pay before and after birth of a live child; 7 weeks after the birth if the child is stillborn. No dismissal during pregnancy or maternity leave. No loss of security,

pension or promotion prospects.

8. Family planning clinics supplying free contraception to be extended to cover every locality. Free abortion to be readily available.

9. Family allowances to be increased to £2.50 per child including the first child.

10. To campaign amongst women to take an active part in trades unions and in political life, so that they may exercise influence commensurate with their numbers and to campaign amongst male trade unionists that they may work to achieve this aim.

It is interesting to compare the demands of the Charter campaign with the demands put forward by the Women's Liberation movement itself. The second WLM conference in 1971 at Skegness agreed the following four demands:

- Equal Pay
- Equal Educational and Job Opportunities
- Free Contraception and Abortion on Demand
- Free 24-hour Nurseries

These were added to at the Edinburgh Conference in 1974:

- Legal and Financial Independence for All Women
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- The Right to a Self Defined Sexuality. An End to Discrimination Against Lesbians.

And in Birmingham in 1978 by:

- . Freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion regardless of marital status; and an end to the laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and aggression to women. [3]

So we can see that the demands of the Charter campaign were more extensive in relation to a number of workplace issues, building as they did on the work done on these questions over a long period in the trade unions. On the other hand, on questions of women's position in the family, they took up all the key issues but in a less radical way.

Free abortion on demand — the slogan of the WLM — encapsulated the idea that the 67 Act did not go far enough — that women should not need permission from any doctor while the Charter slogan that free abortion should be widely available emphasises the fact that women should have to pay.

On nurseries there are also differences with the WLM demand being Free 24-hour Nurseries and the Charter: 'Improved provision of local authority day nurseries, free of charge, with extended hours to suit working mothers. Provision of nursery classes in day nurseries. More nursery schools.

Grunwicks

Women were not only taking action in their workplaces on the question of Equal Pay, important though that was. For many women, the right to organise at all in the workplace was something that had to be fought for. One of Britain's most important industrial disputes of the period which lasted

from August 1976 to July 1978 was at Grunwicks photoprocessing plant in Willsden, West London where the overwhelming majority of the workers were East African Asians.

Following the sacking of a colleague earlier in the day Jayaben Desai, soon to become the undisputed leader of the strike, walked out in protest together with her son Sunil. During the next day they were joined by 75 more workers who demand the right to trade union recognition.

As the dispute developed the question of solidarity was key to winning the dispute. Postal workers refused to handle film for the company quite early on and received the backing of their union, the Union of Postal Workers — who then backed down after the threat of legal action against the union. Later workers in the local office again decided to take solidarity action and were supported by the London District Council of the union, but then this support was again withdrawn after the threat of legal action.

Another aspect of solidarity which was to be key was the increasing importance of mass pickets as the strike entered its second year. Thousands of activists — trade unionists, feminists, Labour Party members and others came to stand in solidarity with the overwhelmingly Asian women workers in their struggle. Police charged the picket lines with horses and a level of determination to break that solidarity. They, together with Margaret Thatcher and the Tories were committed to support George Ward, Grunwicks Managing Director who would not give an inch to the strikers.

One important aspect of the mass pickets was the role played by a then relatively unknown trade unionist by the name of Arthur Scargill. Scargill at that time was the leader of the Yorkshire area of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) which was a militant region in what was generally a right wing union at the time. The role that Scargill and his Yorkshire battalions played at Grunwicks was to stand him and the union in good stead not so many years later when the NUM as a whole was at the front of the struggle in the great miner's strike.

The National Abortion Campaign

In 1975 women in the IMG were central to the launch of the National Abortion Campaign which successfully campaigned over a whole period against a series of attempts to restrict the 1967 Abortion Act. NAC was not a women only campaign but it was women-led and for many of its thousands of activists it was a first introduction to feminist politics.

The 1967 Act was and remains one of the most progressive pieces of legislation on women's abortion rights anywhere in the world — although of course the fact that women still require "approval" from two doctors before being allowed to take some control over their own bodies shows that the fight for a woman's right to choose remains an ongoing battle. Even at the height of strong women's sections in the Labour Party women there never succeeded in preventing abortion being seen as a matter of "individual conscience".

Defence of the 1967 Act was the centre piece of NAC's activities and in practice it was when yet another private member's bill was introduced that there was the greatest spurt of activity with many new people joining the campaign's groups up and down the country. In those days we were each time able to defeat the proposals to further limit our right to choose.

NAC was less successful in generalizing the real availability of abortion provision on the ground. In some areas of the country doctors and consultants blocked women's access again on the basis of their consciences — and there were few day care clinics that could provide abortion facilities in the best possible conditions for women which resulting in most women having terminations on maternity

wards!

We also debated with the anti-abortionists on an ongoing basis — not allowing them any space particularly in the student or labour movement where they could put forward their ideas unchallenged. In particular we showed that the so called evidence they published was distorted and gave the lie to the notion that they had the right to call themselves pro-life when they showed no interest in any other issue that affects women.

But the most important achievement of the campaign was the win support from the trade unions at all levels including the TUC itself. And this was not only a paper commitment. The 1976 TUC Congress voted to support NAC as did many individual unions over those years. The extent of the support on the ground was shown in 1979 when the TUC called a mass demonstration against the latest attempt to further restrict abortion rights by Scottish Tory MP John Corrie. This demonstration of around 80,000 was the largest demonstration on the question of abortion rights ever to take place in Britain — and the largest demonstration called by the TUC on a non-industrial matter ever.

Greenham

In September 1981 a women's peace camp was established at the RAF base at Greenham Common Berkshire by a Welsh group Women for Life on Earth. The women were determined to stop the citing of 96 cruise missiles at the base which had been a US base since 1943. The camp drew support not only from the peace movement which through the work of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was an important part of the radical scene in those years, but also more generally including from feminists.

In December 1982 the first major action took place when 30,000 women encircled the base in the biggest women-only action Britain had ever seen. Slogans such as "Take the Toys from the Boys" where in some ways a challenge for socialist feminists as they seemed to emphasise that men should be seen as the enemy. Nor were all of us comfortable with the idea that women were naturally more peaceful than men.

But as we participated in the actions, and in some cases made longer visits to the permanent women's peace camp our doubts began to fade. We experienced the power of women's organising which together with the commitment to nonviolent direct action made it more difficult for the police to intervene as stridently as they would have liked.

In retrospect too I at least can see that the women's peace movement at Greenham organised in ways that had many things in common with other ways of feminist resistance. What I increasingly think is that people will generally come into political activity to defend the things that affect them most closely so their communities or their children will very often be key motivating factors. This is what I argued earlier in relation to black women organising in Britain and to women's movements elsewhere in the world.

Feminist consciousness as such is very often not the starting point — the job for feminists is to relate to these struggles and show why organising autonomously as women can give us strength in those battles and beyond.

The Miners strike

Women's politics, alongside working class politics as a whole, changed dramatically with the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979. The women's liberation movement — like the left in general but even more so — didn't know what had hit it when Thatcher was elected in 1979. The last conference of the movement as a whole was Birmingham in 1978.

It was not that the overwhelming majority of feminists thought that the election of a woman Prime Minister was in any way a victory for us but that we were unprepared for the ferocity of the attack that her government would launch on so many of the gains that had been won both by women and the working class as a whole in the period since the end of the Second World War.

At the same time it was the 1984-85 Miner strike and the growth of Women against Pit Closures which was to be one of the most important test beds for the ideas of the women's liberation movement as whole and for socialist feminists in particular

Women against Pit Closures was a magnificent alliance between women in a whole range of tightly knit working class communities right across Britain and feminists. The nature of the work in the pits — from which women had been excluded since 1842 — and the fact that there was little other employment in those communities led to a very rigid sexual divisions of labour between women and men. Most women were not in paid employment at all and those who were tended to work part time.

But then the strike itself led to the socialisation of many of the functions of the family — communal eating and childcare which led to a different way of life for women in particular but the community as a whole. Those steps were taken partly for financial reasons — it's cheaper to cook for 300 people in one kitchen than in 100 separate kitchens — but also because it's more efficient in terms of the human hours needed to shop, cook clean etc, so leaving more time for picketting and other. And the experience of collectivising so many aspects of daily life broke down isolation and created stronger bonds of solidarity. Not only was it more efficient — it was often more fun.

Through their experience of organising their own meetings and going on the picket lines, challenging the traditional idea that women were opposed to 'their' men taking industrial action, but rather asserting that Thatcher's attack was an assault on the whole community, they grew enormously in confidence. Women who previously had often not gone beyond the nearest medium sized town spoke all over the country and beyond..Women from Women against Pit Closures were visible supporters of the actions of women at Greenham Common (see above).

Socialist feminists were prominent in miners' support groups up and down the country. The strike and women's organising around it took the politics of women's liberation — both at the level of political demands and ways of organising — into parts of the working class that it had never before reached.

Women against Pit Closures was not the only ground breaking aspect of the miners strike. Lesbians and Gay Men support the Miners (LGSM) did not start in mining communities themselves but in the larger cities of Britain such as London and Manchester where the support movement was strongest and where LGBT politics most developed. This too was a profoundly transformative experience both for those of us involved in solidarity and for many in the NUM and mining communities who through such developments were forced to rethink previous deeply held prejudices.

But the defeat of the strike was so central to the problems of the labour movement over the next decades that it is difficult to measure what the long term consequences of the strike were for women. I'm not aware that any detailed research has been done as to what the effects were in terms

of the sexual division of labour — which was anyway affected by the long term unemployment which hit most pit villages when the mines closed after the defeat of the strike.

Before the strike the NUM newspaper had its own Page 3 [4], afterwards while sexism was not of course eradicated, it would have been unthinkable for Page 3 to continue. More women went on to further education, some relationships broke up — and perhaps others changed. Some women from mining communities continued their political involvement.

The Women against Pit Closure model also had an impact on later industrial struggles. Now the old assumption that women didn't support industrial action had been so strongly challenged we saw other women's support groups develop such as Women on the Waterfront who organised in support of the Liverpool Dockers in 1995

Major shifts in people's ideas and ways of doing things are of course not unique to women's struggle but indicative of the way consciousness changes more rapidly in periods of huge social ferment and less when this isn't the case. But it would be good to know more about what happened to both individual women and the communities they came from..

So after the defeat of the miners strike we saw further fragmentation of the movement. One of the consequences of this which is becoming increasingly apparent to me — and which I plan to try to work to bridge by writing some material and encouraging others to do the same — is that the history of socialist feminism is not known by many young women coming into political activity today

Defeat

The fact that the defeat of the miners's strike by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative, anti-union government was a huge blow against the whole trade union movement in Britain is generally recognised on the left. But it was also a significant blow for the women's liberation movement as a whole — and particularly for the socialist feminist current.

Many women, particularly socialist feminists, began to put a major part of their activism into trade union structures. Women's structures in trade unions often created by women in and around the Communist Parties in the previous political period had during the 1970s and early 1980s been deeply influenced by the politics of the women's liberation movement and had won support from many trade unions in their entirety. This led to the somewhat contradictory situation that in some ways it was more comfortable to be a feminist in the trade union movement than in many single issue campaigns or far left groups.

During the previous political period a layer of women had been employed as "professional feminists" by relatively left-leaning Labour councils including the Greater London Council later abolished by Thatcher or by women's community organisations which gained funding in that period. While much of the work developed here within the context of building alliances between the labour movement and socialist feminism and in the context of rising class struggle were positive, in the context of the defeat of the miners' strike and the disorientation that this led to throughout much of the left, they took on a much more reformist colouring in this difficult political context.

As Jane Kelly's article to which we already referred sets out in detail this also took place in the context of the growth of postmodernist ideas — ideas which impacted internationally across significant sections of the left including amongst feminists

Kelly puts it like this:

"As gender and class became increasingly decoupled, so postmodernism's influence grew. Although the objective political situation in the 1980s was very difficult, these changes were also brought about by the development of theories which have emphasised difference at the expense of unity. In some cases this has included a loosening of ties between the women's and labour movements in the name of the right to express difference, a very postmodern concept. In particular the Communist Party in Britain and especially the writing of Bea Campbell have cynically used demands of the oppressed to be heard in order to attack the "male" labour movement and turn sections of the organised oppressed away from alliances with it. This has been part of a strategy pursued by the CP throughout the 1980s, marked by increasingly right-wing politics, the rejection of the class struggle, the seeking of a system of alliances of the oppressed where class was given no determining position and the adoption of the slogan "New Times" to describe a society claimed by them to be dominated by "post-Fordist" production. They wholeheartedly adopted the ideas of postmodernism, giving space in their journal to writers such as Baudrillard. All this culminated in the demise of their ill-named journal Marxism Today and the folding up of the party itself.

..."Both within socialist feminist circles and among those developing cultural theory and analysis, Marxism was slowly rejected in favour of a looser framework, often influenced by structuralism and post structuralism. In both arenas the rightward lurches of the Communist Party had an important effect."

This is the context then in which the history of socialist feminism as the dominant current at the beginning of second wave feminism and which continued to fight one during the eighties took place – a time when the ideas of the women's liberation movement as a whole became increasingly buried in the myth of post-feminism.

I hope that this article, hastily drafted with inadequate time to discuss with the many women with whom I shared all or many of the struggles I mention above, who I am sure have much to add to my own imperfect memories and analysis, will stimulate discussion not only amongst those who were politically active through the days of second wave feminism but, maybe more importantly, will be of interest to the thousands of younger women coming into political activity today. I look forward to all your comments, additions and criticisms.

Terry Conway

P.S.

* See Socialist Resistance: <http://socialistresistance.org/?p=4875> and post your comments there.

Footnotes

[1] see ["Black Women and Anti-Rape Activism"](#) for some interesting reflections on aspects of this].

[2] See on ESSF (article 28067), [Postmodernism and Feminism](#).

[3] The Birmingham conference also split off the first part of the sixth demand and made it a preamble to all the others.

[4] A reference to the tabloid *Sun* newspaper which has lightly-clad, often topless, pictures on its Page 3.