

women in the british miners' strike

WIVES OR WARRIORS ?

Lyn Beaton



Photo by Lyn Beaton

Women's Picket at a North Nottinghamshire Pit in late 1984

I went to Blidworth, a Nottinghamshire coalmining village in the middle of September 1985, during the British Miners' Strike. I stayed there for six months living and working with the striking community. I originally intended to stay for two weeks and write some articles about the involvement of women in the strike. Instead I stayed six months and wrote a book about it.

During the six months, my life was much the same as that of any of the miners' wives in the village, except that I didn't have the same responsibilities as they had, and the stress and tensions under which they worked often escaped me. But I worked for the strike, ate at the strike centre and shared the pains and joys. I was working on the book, but that didn't really cause any distinction between me and the other women because they all had their own special tasks too. The workload was very carefully divided and each woman had her own area of particular responsibility.

The book, *Shifting Horizons*, is about the lives of two of the Blidworth women during the strike and how the strike affected them and changed their attitudes and values to everything around them. In this article I want to take the opportunity to write about my own impressions of the strike and how it affected my attitudes to the world and its potential for change. In particular, how the role of the women in the strike clarified for me a lot of the complexities which have always haunted my attempts to marry gender politics with class politics. But first I think it's necessary to provide a little background about the strike itself.

In Britain during the miners' strike it was impossible not to recognize that this strike was quite different to anything else we had seen in our life times. This was not only because it went on for so long, or because it challenged many of the myths which still survived and were the rationale for British imperialist excesses, but because the strike was recognized very quickly as the essence of a new challenge to British capitalism. Just when it had seemed that the British working class had lost their ability to fight in the face of constant attacks from the Tory Government, the miners took up cudgels to defend themselves and in doing so gave hope and inspiration to the rest of the British labour movement.

The British ruling class launched its attack on the miners on all fronts. They forced the strike in March 1984 knowing that it would have to survive for six months before the next winter would make coal shortages a problem. They unleashed a police force which had been preparing for 10 years (since the 1974 victory of the miners which brought down the Heath Government) to deal with a widespread industrial dispute. They gave the police new weapons by hurrying new anti-union legislation through parliament. Daily the press broadcast the propaganda of the Government and the National Coalboard in a campaign which was compared to Goebbel's media control of fascist Germany in the 1930s. They attempted to starve the miners by introducing special regulations for miners' families claiming social security. They used the courts and the legal system to victimize, criminalize, and intimidate miners and to abduct the funds of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The Coalboard offered bonuses to miners who helped them to break the strike. But despite all of this, the miners fought for 12 months and gave the rest of us example and inspiration. Some indication of the intensity of all this can be illustrated by a description of my first 36 hours in Blidworth. When I arrived Nottinghamshire was under police siege. Since the beginning Nottinghamshire had been the weak link in the National Union of Mineworkers. Nottinghamshire (Notts) has a history of scabbing which dates back to the general strike of 1926, but in the 1972 and the 1974 strikes they were solid. However in 1984 the call to strike was frustrated in Notts by a union leadership who at best wavered and at worst worked against the strike from the beginning. Only about a quarter of the Nott's miners went on strike. In all other areas the strike was solid, it was only in Notts that it was divided. There are 180,000 miners nationally and so the Nott's scabs, although a majority in Notts itself, were a small minority of the National Union. But the Government and the Coalboard with the aid of the press and the police put all their hopes for breaking the strike on this small minority of Nott's scabs. Miners from the rest of the country came into Notts to try and talk to the Notts miners about the importance of the strike and so the police focused first of all on Notts. It was said that the police occupation of Notts was to ensure that working miners could continue working without harrassment from pickets, but you only had to spend a short amount of time in Notts to see that in fact, the police occupation had much more sinister intentions. The police were in Notts to try and intimidate the strikers back to work. Police road blocks were set up at nearly every intersection around the county. You couldn't drive in or out without being stopped by police and asked where you were going and what for. If police suspected you supported the strike they could send you back to where you came from, order you under threat of arrest not to attend any picket lines, or, if they felt uncomfortable about taking either of those

courses of action they would simply hassle you about your car registration, roadworthiness or your driver's licence. Or, if they felt safe enough, they would just lay into you physically. It was possible to be stopped three or four times on a short eight mile journey within the county.

In the villages themselves, the police occupation took the form of police walking around the village in twos, stopping people, and asking them questions. They asked men if they were strikers, kids if their dads were strikers, and women if their husbands were strikers. If the answer was yes, they would be intimidated in one way or another. Small kids were told to tell their dads to get back to work or they'd be arrested. Men were waylaid in dark lonely alleys and asked under threat of physical violence if they were going to the picket line. And around the pit, police swarmed like dark sinister armies of occupation at their headquarters, walking around guarding it, using its canteen as their own, and waiting in their buses for a call to action.

On my first day in Blidworth we went to a court case. Three young lads had been arrested a couple of months before in an incident which started because a scab had waved his pay packet at the strikers as he came out from work. As we were driving into the nearby town where the case was being heard, one of the women said to me, 'You'll never believe what you see here.' Somewhat arrogantly I thought to myself, oh yes, I know, I've been around the left for years, I know how it works. But I was mistaken. For a whole day I sat in court watching three young men, bemused and horrified by what was happening to them, giving evidence which in every detail was consistent with each other and with their other witnesses. On the other side a scab and two police officers gave evidence which contradicted itself over and over again. At the end of the day I was sure that no matter how biased the magistrates were and no matter how much they might have wanted to pass guilty verdicts, they just couldn't do it on the evidence that had been presented. But they did. All three were found guilty and given heavy fines. I was not the only one surprised. The barrister representing the miners, who had come up from a pool of London lawyers who had donated their services to the miners, was on his first miners' case. All through the day he told us that he was an experienced left-wing defense barrister and that he understood the bias of the courts. Even he found the flagrant bias of the courts difficult to believe. No-one had believed that British justice was so delicate and could so easily be dispensed with.

The following day we went to another village to an early morning women's picket. The first shift goes in at 4 a.m., so it was still dark when we arrived. It wasn't a very large picket. There were about 60 of us, mostly women, and we were outnumbered by police. We were forced to stand some distance from the pit itself and were surrounded by a cordon of police, which was all normal picket practice. After we'd been there for about an hour and there had been no incidents whatsoever, and no hint of any, we saw a police car drive up and a policewoman get out. All the women with me said that meant there were going to be arrests and sure enough within minutes, three police moved into our ranks and lifted one of the women. She had allegedly sung out, 'Scab!' — it was offensive language. In the meantime scabs were calling us all the filthy sexist things you could imagine, as well as dropping their trousers on occasion and brown-eyeing us, and the police thought their antics very funny. An hour later the van with the arrested woman in it started to move off but only got 50 yards up the road before it turned around and came back. Later the woman told us that they'd had a radio message not to leave because there would be more arrests. At that time there had been no more incidents, but as soon as the van returned, the police moved in again and lifted another three of us. This time some scuffles did break out, we were all so outraged at their attacks on our right to picket.



'Support the Miners' Rally held in London and attended by 100,000 miners and supporters one week before the end of the Strike.

Again I was flabbergasted. I had seen lots of police-provoked violence at demonstrations and rallies before, but I had never seen police blatantly walk into a peaceful group and pick someone up for nothing. The second group of arrests were because one of the women had sung out to one of the scabs, 'I hope your next shit's a hedgehog'. A Danish television crew was at the picket and they were so horrified by what they saw that they offered, and in fact did, come back to Notts as witnesses in the court case when it came up.

This picket as I said was a women's picket. By the time I arrived the women were very well organized. Groups of miners' wives formed committees in each village. Initially the committees were to raise funds to provide food to the striking communities, but they quickly became much more. They became defense committees which dealt with all aspects of the strike and rapidly broadened their activities to include many separate but related political issues.

In Nottinghamshire a Central Women's Support Group was set up to form an umbrella for the village based groups. Every Monday night delegates from each village met to discuss the distribution of food, money and clothes and to plan campaigns, rallies, meetings and pickets. At first the Women's Support Groups were seen by the women themselves and by the country as a whole as quite traditional. It was traditional for women to organize food and clothing, but in no time at all the women in the groups demanded full participation in the strike itself. In Blidworth the first activities of the women were to join the men on the picket lines. From there they started to raise money to provide food, and then they realized that they needed a centre in which to cook and serve the food. Their efforts to secure such a place in the village were frustrated by right wing Labour Party officials, so they occupied the building they wanted. Eight women went off to take over the building. None of them had ever been involved in any political activity except voting before. When they told me about it, they said things like, 'We couldn't believe they wouldn't let us have it, so we decided to take it.' 't was our idea, we didn't even tell the men we were going to do it, we were afraid they might try to stop us and we wanted to show them that we could do it on our own.'

The occupation led to violence and in the end some of the men did come and stay the night with the women. The next morning they discussed what they wanted for a centre and all agreed it must be more than just somewhere to feed the men and children. It must be a community centre, a strike headquarters, where all strikers and their families could feel at home, hold meetings and organize, plan and administer the strike on the village level. The strike was only two months old when the strike centre was set up. In all other villages in Notts similar activities were taking place.

The women had set up a committee as soon as they started to organize, that ran the centre. The men attended NUM meetings once a week and held open meetings in the centre every Friday morning. Very soon the women all attended these open meetings. The Women's Committee met every Sunday morning. It was called the Women's Committee, which indeed it was, but it was in no way separatist as some of the men were on it, but it was dominated and led by women.

Jobs were divided among everybody. Different women took on different responsibilities, some in the areas of cooking, and others kept control of the pantry, arranged the menus, and did the shopping. One woman who was made responsible for social welfare, took courses to learn what entitlements striking miners' families had and made sure everybody in the village was receiving them. She helped people deal with the bureaucracy and kept lists of sympathetic professionals to be called on if necessary. Another woman took responsibility for helping the single lads. They were entitled to no social security benefits at all, and many of them were evicted from their lodgings and had very little access to clothing and other basics. Other women became involved in raising funds and politically liaising with organizations and individuals which were offering support to the strikers.

The work involved in running the centre itself was enormous: it fed a maximum of 300 families; it was open seven days a week and served three meals a day; the midday meal was always a cooked meat and vegetable dinner. It became home for the striking community and it was an unconscious experiment in communal living. Everything was shared, and everybody brought their problems to the centre where they were dealt with by everybody else — not just economic problems but emotional ones as well. At first money came in bits and pieces and was very irregular. Gradually, as relations between the strikers and their supporters grew, support became more regular and reliable, but the administration of it was full-time work for 30 women.

As the strike progressed the capabilities and the confidence of the women grew. They knew instinctively that they were engaged in one of the most important struggles seen in capitalist Britain and they began to develop an awareness of the importance of their role in that struggle. It was clear that the strength, courage and initiatives of the women were vital to the continuation of the strike and the women earned the men's respect. To a large extent the men saw the strike in traditional terms. They were committed members of a powerful union and they were fighting to defend that union in the same way they had always fought attacks on their own organization. They went picketing, they went to union meetings and rallies.

But the women moved out into the broader labour movement where they learnt to see the strike in a broader context. Women who described themselves before the strike as 'just housewives' travelled up and down the country speaking at public meetings, all sorts of conferences, rallies and demonstrations for all sorts of other causes as well as the miners. They made links with other organizations fighting against the Tory Government and they developed a broad political understanding of the class nature of their battle. Back in the villages things were changing. Miners have always been seen as one of the most sexist groups of men and perhaps they were, but during the strike they were forced to recognize the strength and importance of the women and to give way to it. The women provided not only material nourishment but very soon they provided spiritual and intellectual nourishment as well. They developed knowledge and understanding of the legal system and made links with legal centres. Any arrested man would come straight to the women for help and support, and was assured of both. The women started to become more vocal at the open meetings, often giving the men a dressing down for some apathy or despondence which had developed. The men not only accepted all this but respected it.

Men started to take responsibility for the children and housework — the women were too busy. The women who did the cooking asked that the men help and rosters were drawn up for men to wash the dishes and peel the potatoes. The more sensitive of the men helped with the shit work around the centre, sweeping and washing floors, and clearing away the never-ending bits and pieces. It was common at the centre to hear men talking about whether it would rain or not because they had washing on the line. In many of the houses men would moan if you left a cup sitting on a table because, 'I've just cleaned up.' One humorous side of all this was how the men moaned about their newly acquired domestic responsibilities, and the women laughed to themselves that the men were finally learning how tiresome and burdensome housework was. Men who had previously had little time for their children suddenly became closer to them and suddenly took responsibility for them. There was little choice if the mother was away for nights at a time, raising money and drumming up support for the strike.

Whilst the political respect which developed for the women was general among the men, the taking over of domestic responsibilities was not. A lot of men didn't change and a lot has been made of that. But for me the important thing is not to look at those who didn't change but to look at those who did. They were a significant enough number to make it clear to me that such changes are not only possible but an inevitable part of social change.

The women developed a confidence and a pride in themselves. Women who had never been listened to before, were being run off their feet with invitations to speak all over the country and on platforms with the 'big names' of the labour movement. When the men saw with what awe visiting supporters held every word of the women, they started to listen to them themselves and the women suddenly found they had a voice and they had opinions about all sorts of things that had never been heard before.

Outside of the mining communities the whole country was rallying with support. Union branches, labour party branches, community groups of all sorts, and groups specially set up to raise support for the strike worked hard to raise money and give moral support. The women's movement in England had fallen into a quarrelsome state of despondency, much as it has here, and the rise of the miners' wives brought it new life. Women from everywhere flocked to the support groups. It wasn't only the miners' wives who came to the fore in the struggle but women from all over the country who supported the strike as well. Women came in droves to the pit villages offering support to the miners' wives and many of them brought with them the ideology of the women's movement which the miners' wives took on vehemently. In practice things had already started to change. Now ideas were coming which gave those changes a meaning beyond the strike. Gender politics became an integral part of the struggle which was clearly a class one.

The women started to think and talk about after the strike, they started to challenge what had always been. They started to talk about the nature of relationships and the sex roles within them and they talked about all this in full view and hearing of the men. Some of the men accepted it and others fought it, but they were fighting a losing battle. By now they knew they needed the women to win the dispute. Men started to talk about the changes in the women, many of them appreciating and respecting them. After a certain point not a miner ever spoke on a platform without commending the work of the women and in most cases crediting the women as a vital part of the continuation of the strike. Some men even made moving emotional revelations from public platforms about not really knowing their wives before this strike. I remember very clearly hearing one man say that since the strike his wife had

become much more than just a wife — she had become his best mate as well. In private the men applauded the work of the women and the changes in their self-confidence. Of course again, this was not all the men. All the men applauded the women, but many men's wives didn't actually become very involved at all and I suspect those men of a very typical hypocrisy. It's easy to applaud another man's wife when your own is still safely tucked at home. But again, enough men accepted their wives' changed roles to make it very significant and very inspiring.

One of the most clarifying things which came out of the strike for me is that the miners' wives didn't assert themselves in spite of the men or against the men. They did it so they could take an equal place alongside the men and they did it in their own way and on their own terms and with the respect of the men. Ever since my first contact with the ideology and practice of the Women's Movement there has been a dilemma about how to amalgamate that with the class struggle. I have always believed that the class struggle must take priority, but that has never meant that I want to lie down and support a male-dominated revolution which shows no empathy for the plight or repression of women as women. But it has meant that I have always been uncomfortable with a lot of the aims the women's movement has adopted which have in many cases countered the class struggle. Moves to have women accepted in places of power have always confused me. Yes of course women should have the right to do anything men can do. But if that means becoming complicit with the bourgeois state, what is the point? Now all that is clear. Yes, the class struggle is the more important — it will be the working classes of the world that will overthrow the capitalism of the world and the perversions which call themselves communist. And women will inevitably form a vital part of that struggle. It's not just that they should for the sake of ideological purity, which has more or less been the attitude of the traditional left. It's that they will and must because without them the struggle can't be won. The rise of women will take place on both sides of the class fence. Bourgeois women will rise to take positions of power alongside bourgeois men and working class women will rise to fight that power alongside working class men. And it is clear that we must not confuse the two groups just because they are all women. In the long run they have nothing in common whatsoever. They are not empathetic or even sympathetic. They are two anti-pathetic parts of the whole.

That Margaret Thatcher, a woman, was Prime Minister of Britain during the strike is as significant as is the rise of the miners' wives. For too long, when asked does our stand on women include women like Margaret Thatcher, we have denied her status among our hallowed ranks and accused her and her ilk of men's methods and men's attitudes. But that has been too simple. It has prevented us from understanding that as a woman she has risen to heights of power, that she is part of the whole, and she is opposed with every bone in her body to any changes which will effect capitalism, and as such she is as much our enemy as any capitalist man.

Capitalism would prefer a tight patriarchal rein but I believe it can cope without it. Capitalism is in crisis now and it is striving to utilise all the reserves it has to keep it in power. The women's movement has shown the wasted reserves of women, and the ruling classes were not slow to take that up. But that is not a bad thing in itself, in fact quite the reverse. In the fight women have waged to gain a share of the power they have made themselves a force to be reckoned with. Many of them have, and will continue to be bought off by the ruling class, all in the good name of equal opportunity. But many more will take their fight, and the knowledge that has come from that fight, into the class arena where they will become full participants of the class struggle.

*Blidworth Site Centre:
three meals a day were served
seven days a week throughout
the twelve months of the Strike.*

Photo by Lyn Beaton



Men have been made soft by the privileges capitalism has given them. They are not as aware of the need for real change as women who have always been more oppressed and have so much less to lose. Not only that, but because of their privileged positions in capitalist society, men are much more tied into the system and much less able to see it from outside. They are less able to change the way they work. The miners' strike is an example of this. The strike was in an industry which, in Britain, is still legislatively exclusive of women. But when that industry was attacked whole communities were also attacked. The men were used to attacks. They had developed methods to fight those attacks, and those methods were able to provide some defense during capitalism. Now it is time to develop methods, not just to defend ourselves, but to change capitalism itself. We need to find new ways to fight and because men are so used to defending themselves in the old way, they are less able to develop new methods than women who are not bound by an historical practice.

Different times demand different action. During the boom which capitalism managed to sustain after the Second World War, women started to want to share in the fruits of that boom. Perhaps their activities in the Second World War had given them knowledge that they were able to work as men and therefore deserved the same rewards. Certainly the development of contraception, giving them a measure of control over their own reproductive lives and the development of labour saving domestic appliances provided the conditions for women to demand equal access to the workforce. The conscious fight for these things has been continuous since the beginnings of capitalism, but it received a great boost in the late sixties when the daughters of the Second World War reached adulthood. They were the first generation with some guarantee of control over their reproductive lives. They were also the first generation who could be quite confident that they would be in receipt of enough domestic appliances to ensure that their lives wouldn't be taken up by domestic labour and they demanded a right to enter the paid labour market.

At that time, it was a fight for women, but ideas always lag behind what has actually happened. Now the time for fighting for equality with men FOR ALL WOMEN is past. Capitalism is in crisis and if it is not overthrown it will destroy the world. The fight now is to overthrow capitalism. The fight for women is to find the way to do that. Working class women and middle class women who want real change, not just a well-paid job for themselves, must bring the strength they have gained and the methods they have learned for fighting into the class struggle. Their energies must be put into developing ways to overthrow capitalism itself and to ensure that it is replaced with a society which guarantees humanity and equity of opportunity and reward.

The miners returned to work almost 12 months after their heroic battle started. But they did not go back defeated, they went back very seriously wounded. In the end the attacks on them were too great for them to resist alone. To avoid defeat, they retreated and it was a very drastic retreat. But retreat is NOT defeat. From September when the NUM asked the British Trades Union Congress for industrial support from other unions they recognized that this was more than an industrial dispute. It was class war, and they knew, that as just one section of the English working class, they could not win without the support of the rest. They had spiritual and economic support from the rest of the labour movement but not industrial or political support, and they needed both. The leaders of the labour movement in the Labour Party and the Trade Unions betrayed the miners and the rank and file of other unions who were clearly prepared to take the necessary industrial action, but were denied any leadership to co-ordinate it. The lessons of the miners strike are to learn how to prevent that situation from recurring. How can we make sure that when such an event happens again, we can bypass the labour movement leaderships which are determined at all costs to maintain the system as they have always known it?

The return to work of the miners, the pain and agony that was involved in that, the closure of many pits since that return to work, the continued attacks by the Tory Government on other sections of the English working class, are not easy to see past. It would be easy to become disillusioned by these recent events and many people have. But the effects of the strike on the communities which were involved in them will not go away so easily. The committees are all still functioning, and they are involving themselves in other disputes. In

Blidworth they are fighting for a community centre to be built in the village, 'so that next time, we'll have somewhere to set up which is ours.' There is a lot of heartbreak and a lot of demoralization, but it is not the overwhelming feeling. The overwhelming feeling is that there will be a next time, and that next time, they will be more prepared. The main reason the committees are being continued is because they were set up as defence committees and the war is not over.

It would be naive to predict a glorious socialist victory in Britain — sadly I cannot do so — but I am sure that the fight is not over that it is winnable, but only if all of the resources of the working class are co-ordinated and focused on that victory. I am so sick of the demoralizing attitudes of so much of the left-wing, the women's movement and the labour movement. Before the miners' strike, they said the working class had lost its desire to fight. Proved wrong, they are now saying, there is no point in fighting, you never win anyway, nothing ever changes.

I am sick of having defeats and failures rammed down my throat when I show optimism about the imminence of revolutionary change. To all those who want to say, but the miners lost, but lots of the women didn't change, lots of the men maintained their sexist attitudes and anyway what relevance is all this to Australia, I want to say, if you really believe there is no point in fighting, there is no point in pretending you have any sympathies with those of us who want to fight. It will not be easy, there will be setbacks along the way, but there is no choice. Attacks will continue and not to fight them will be to give in. Australia is no different to anywhere else, just a little cushioned by isolation.

In February this year Bjelke Petersen's National Party Government sacked 1000 workers from the South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB). Since this time SEQEB workers have been in dispute with the Queensland Government demanding that all sacked workers be reinstated. The Petersen Government has attempted to break this strike and prevent other sections of the trade union movement from acting in defence of their jobs by introducing vicious anti trade union legislation designed to smash basic union rights.

During July, two women, Robyn Bourne and Jenny Burroughs, from the SEQEB Women's Committee have been visiting Melbourne and addressing groups sympathetic to the Queensland workers about the history of the strike in an attempt to gain more support for their cause. Speaking to a group of women at the Melbourne Town Hall Robyn and Jenny described how terrible they felt when the blockade of Queensland, organized by the ACTU, was called off. Robyn said that this was the 'lowest point of the strike'. Apart from anything else, ending the blockade meant that the SEQEB dispute could be virtually ignored by the mass media outside Queensland.

It is obvious in speaking to Robyn and Jenny that their experience in the strike has had a big effect on their lives both personally and politically. Both women have not been involved in the paid workforce since marrying in their late teens and involvement in the Women's Committee has been a new experience for them. Robyn is from the Brisbane area and Jenny from the more isolated Gold Coast region.

It is important that workers in other parts of Australia be kept informed of the developments taking place in Queensland between the SEQEB workers and the government because the outcome will effect all of us. The Women's Committee sees that part of their job is to try and get information about the strike flowing to other areas.

The following interview with Robyn and Jenny was conducted by Gwyneth Evans in Melbourne in July.

QUEENSLAND WOMEN JOIN STRIKE an interview

Could you please tell us when the Women's Committee was formed and why it was formed?

Robyn: It was formed when we couldn't get any media coverage and we saw a need for it to be kept alive in the papers. No matter what our husbands tried to do in their protests they could not get media coverage. So we women more or less came out of our kitchens and formed a group. Since then we have been lobbying National Party politicians, we've been involved in various actions up there, mainly to keep it alive in the media. We've also been supportive to other women who are not in a position to come out of their homes.

Apart from the Women's Committee have you had any involvement in the strike — what's been the role of women in the union and what sort of attitude has the union had to your involvement all along?

Jenny: The women have been very strong behind their hus-