

Lynn Beaton looks at the Blidworth experience

Women's place in the revolutionary struggle*

IN THE LAST two issues of Workers Press we have shown the importance of the role of women in revolutionary struggles around the world.

This week we come home, as it were, and pay tribute to the work of women in the 1984-1985 Miners' Strike.

In closing this series of articles we open a discussion about the relationship between women and the revolutionary party.

BY AND LARGE the lessons of the strike have still to be drawn. It very quickly became something quite different from anything any of us had seen in our lifetimes.

This was not only because it went on for so long, or because it challenged many of the myths which still survive and are the rationale for British excesses, such as the objective fairness of 'British justice'.

It was because the strike was recognised as the essence of a new challenge to British capitalism itself.

Just when it had seemed that the working class had lost its ability to fight in the face of constant attacks from the Tory government, the mining communities took up the cudgels to defend themselves and, in doing so, gave hope and inspiration to the rest of the labour movement.

But the sudden and frustrating end of the strike left us all open-mouthed and gaping. Only one thing was clear.

None of the traditional working class organisations had been able to meet the challenge for leadership made by the mining communities who, in the end, were forced back to work by a demoralising isolation which prevented the struggle being taken any further.

Even so, the strike cannot be seen overall as a total defeat for the miners or the working class. Gains were made – of which one stands head and shoulders above the others:

The political metamorphosis of thousands of working class women who rose to meet the demands put on them and in that process changed from self-professed housewives to dedicated and conscious fighters against capitalism.

I lived for the last six months of the strike in the Nottinghamshire pit village of Blidworth. Because of my own involvement with the situation in Notts and because that situation was different from most other coalfields I want to make it clear that I am talking specifically about Notts/

Although the rise of women in other coalfields was no less significant, it took a slightly different form.

There were two main reasons why the Notts experience differed from most others. Firstly, the strikers were in a minority and the refusal of the Notts area of the NUM to support the strike meant that the strikers and their families had almost no resources 'at all except those that they fought for.

* From p. 10, *The Workers Press*, Saturday March 22 1986

Secondly. Notts was seen as the most vulnerable area of the strike, it became the frontline of the battle between the state and the national NUM for the first half of the strike at least. By the time I arrived there in August 1984. the striking communities were very well organised. At the forefront of this organisation were the women. We are all now familiar with the support groups which were formed in each village.

At first they were seen by the women themselves and the country as a whole as quite traditional, providing food and clothing.

But in no time at all the women in the groups demanded full participation in the strike itself. The support groups had become defence committees which dealt with all aspects of the strike and rapidly took on many separate but related political struggles.

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 realised that they needed a centre in which to cook and serve the food.

Their efforts to secure such a place were frustrated by right-wing Labour Party officials, so they occupied the building they wanted.

Eight women set off to take over the village youth club. None of them had ever been involved in any political activity except voting before.

One of the women told me: 'We couldn't believe they wouldn't let us have it. We felt that it was ours and that our cause was desperate enough so we decided to take it. It was our idea, we didn't even tell the men we were going to do it for fear they might try to stop us.'

As soon as a Centre was established it was understood by everyone that it was to be much more than a soup kitchen.

'We wanted a strike headquarters. somewhere we could all feel at home, hold meetings, organise, plan and administer the strike on a village level.'

Each village had its women's group as well as its NUM branch. A Notts Women's Support Group was set up as an umbrella for the village-based groups.

Every Monday night delegates from the villages attended a Central Group meeting to discuss the distribution of food, money and clothes and to plan campaigns, rallies, meetings and women's pickets.

In Blidworth, the Blidworth Action Group was led and dominated by the work of the women. Every Friday morning there was an open meeting. Before long the women all participated fully in that, often taking leadership positions, particularly where morale was concerned.

The work involved in running the Centre was full-time work for thirty women. A maximum of 300 families were provided with three meals, seven days a week.

Each woman took on a special responsibility: welfare rights, legal advice and support for those arrested, looking after the money, arranging the menus, shopping, speaking around the country to raise money, cooking and political liaison with a number of different organisations who were supporting the strike or involved in struggle themselves.

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 resourcefulness of the women were vital to the strike's continuation and the women began to earn 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 were fighting to defend that union in the same way they

had always fought attacks on their own organisation. They went picketing, they went to union meetings and rallies.

But the women moved out into the broader labour movement. They travelled up and down the country speaking at meetings, conferences, rallies and demonstrations.

They made links with other organisations fighting against the Tory government and developed a broad political understanding of the class nature of their battle.

Back in the villages, things were changing. The women were away a lot of the time and men had to take care of the children and take responsibility for the housework.

In the Centre, the men were put onto a roster to peel potatoes and wash dishes.

Outside the mining communities the whole country was rallying with support. Union branches. Labour Party branches, community groups of all sorts and specially set up support groups were working hard to raise money and give moral support.

In all of these organisations, women came forward. The miners' wives were not only bringing inspiration to the men of the pit communities but also inspired women all; over the country who flocked to pit villages offering support.

Many of these women also brought with them the ideology of the women's movement and the miners' wives adopted much of it eagerly.

In practice, things had already started to change. Now ideas were coming which gave those changes a meaning beyond the strike.

I don't think there is very much danger that the women from the pit villages will adopt bourgeois feminism. The strike developed a class consciousness of which a bond between the men and women was an integral part.

That bond is one of equality. The women asserted themselves, not in spite of the men or against the men as so many middle class feminists have done.

They asserted themselves to take an equal place alongside the men and they did it in their own way, on their own terms and with the respect of the men.

Perhaps most important of all is that they did it in struggle.

But the main lesson is that women must never be underestimated.

Socialists have tended to treat women in the past as a backward reactionary group within the working class who somehow need some special education on the need for revolutionary change which is not needed by men. Yet there are no historical examples which show this to be true.

At the end of the Second International, it was the women of the German Democratic Party who led the fight for opposition to the war in that party.

Most of those Women were won to the Third International and their ideas were instrumental in the formulation of early Soviet policy on women.

But the Stalinist reaction in the Third International rapidly relegated the women activists to a secondary role.

As far as I can determine, the Fourth International and all its claimant sections have done little to change that situation.

Many claimant sections paid some tokenistic heed to the demands of the women's movement which arose in the late 1960s but none of them undertook any real Marxist analysis of them.

The Healy-led International Committee ignored the question altogether, allowing the most backward of bourgeois male-chauvinist practices to become rampant throughout its Sections.

This whole attitude towards women as a backward and somehow insignificant part of the working class is bourgeois through and through.

At the beginning of the miners' strike it was commonly believed that the women would drive the men back to work.

This view was held not only by the labour movement but was acted on by the government when it tried to starve the women and their children by cutting their Social Security allowances.

Reactionaries everywhere called on the women to 'get their men back to work'.

In fact, if anything, the reverse was the case. The women of the strike came to understand more quickly and more deeply beyond the need for victory for the NUM to the need for complete social change.

This is hardly surprising. The women had nothing much to gain from a return to their old roles. After all, women are doubly oppressed and so have twice as much to gain.

The revolutionary party must learn to understand and develop work on the special needs of women. Any appeals to the supposed backwardness of women or empty promises of a better life after the revolution' will be a waste of time.

Unless women can see a party that is seriously working towards relieving their oppression and treating them with the respect of an equal, why should they be attracted to revolutionary politics?

And unless the party learns to appreciate that often it is women who are the most conscious section of struggles, thousands of opportunities to advance socialist change will be lost.

Any party which can achieve these two necessities will not only be relieving itself of the burden of bourgeois ideology towards women.

It will find itself strengthened and enriched by the enormous capabilities of women as organisers, by their massive resourcefulness, by their intellectual sensitivity and by their unceasing courage.