

# WOMEN:



*Mardy women march in Birmingham. July 19*

# The heart of the resistance

# The world turned upside down

"At a time of unrest and strike action, the proletarian woman, downtrodden, timid, without rights, suddenly grows and learns to stand tall and straight. The self-centred narrow-minded and politically backward "female" becomes an equal, a fighter, a comrade. The transformation is unconscious and spontaneous, but it is important and significant because it reveals the way in which participation in the workers' movement brings the woman worker towards her liberation, not only as the seller of labour power, but also as a woman, a wife, a mother and a housekeeper."

Alexandra Kollontai wrote that in 1920, yet it could be about today. Alexandra was writing a history of working class Russian women with whom she fought, as a socialist and sister, against the Tsarist tyranny. The development and organisation of those women then is comparable to the spirit of the women today, organising in Women Against Pit Closures groups.

The Russian women Kollontai writes of were struggling for basic rights of bread, peace and land. They fought alongside their male counterparts but fought also for their self-liberation as women.

Women Against Pit Closures was much more than a support group of women fighting for the jobs of their husbands, sons, brothers, lovers.

At first, women responded to the strike by providing essential services — organising food distribution, soup kitchens, etc.

## A new awareness

Within weeks, women were not just staffing the soup kitchens but organising pickets, rallies, demonstrations, collections and public speaking.

"On early pickets, 2.30 am and 4.30 am, too early to go back to bed. Back in an hour or two or three. Stay up to see the kids up and breakfast. Food parcels to go out 11 am - 3 pm. Back for the kids coming home. Tea time. Meeting, social security problems to sort out. Someone needs shoes for the picket line. Someone is depressed. Fund-raising needs organising. Provisions need buying for the food parcels, and parcels need making up, 500 of them..."

The list of tasks is endless and gruelling. Most women doing this have kids, some like Ann from Kiveton Park have jobs to do as well. Some like Mary from Wales have to stop a husband and son going back to work.

Clearly the strike could not have got this far if it were not for the dynamic, forceful organisation of women in the pit villages. The level of solidarity they have provided has been unrivalled by any other section of the organised labour movement.

Crusty socialists still maintain that the self-organisation of women is by nature divisive and what is more, working class women just don't do it. Really?

Women Against Pit Closures have turned such arguments on their head.

"It was as though women had been asleep for hundreds of years. We awoke to a



Photo: Martin Jenkinson/Yorkshire Miner

new awareness, a realisation of what we as women could do. It is only comparable to the suffragettes. Do you know, I believe we are a part of history being made" (from South Yorkshire).

The aspirations raised by women involved in the strike can only take us forward. Women have gained much by breaking their

isolation, having childcare more available and collective eating. We must now organise around such demands as 24 hour, free nurseries, a woman's right to choose and collective facilities.

"After the strike we will keep ourselves together and do you know what we'll do first! We'll have a campaign against low

pay because it hits women — and we'll start with the women in the canteen and bar staff — get them a pay rise, something the NUM should have done" (from South Yorkshire).

In a traditionally male dominated set-up, many men are acknowledging the contribution of women and respecting their need for independence. A sense of equality has been reached far greater than at any other time of our working class history.

At the same time, women have witnessed in themselves changing consciousness and political awareness which makes them say "We cannot go back to the status quo". Kids have eaten better in the collective soup kitchens, shopping has a whole new meaning — it's collective or non-existent because it's distributed, shared and some days you don't have to do it at all.

Women get out more, go off in flying pickets, go to meetings or even get away to parties...organised by support groups. Women meet other women in struggle, from Greenham Common, from Barking and South London Hospitals, from Namibia, from Ireland.

Women do not want to return to the status quo. That means we have to take up women's demands and fight for them here and now. Women have fought alongside their men in the NUM because they realise that if the NUM is smashed then our hopes of equality and liberation will be that harder to fight for.

Working class women, normally isolated and alienated in the home have come out, got together and organised with determination to win.

Though circumstances are the most materially severe and repressive they have ever experienced, there has been a sense of freedom gained. It has cut across much of the mythology of women's "natural" role, leading them to question their former selves.

## Cooking Picket Pie

The Women's Action group has been working hard since the early weeks of the strike. We've been providing families with three food parcels a week, since we don't have cooking facilities in our club.

We started off by raising voluntary funds ourselves — by going out in the street with the NUM banner and standing out all morning. We got some funny looks at first, but soon contributions started coming in.

We also go to Rotherham to collect, but the funds are drying up now. We've bled our own areas dry. If people are not unemployed, they're pensioners or strikers — mind you, some pensioners are our best supporters.

We also run a weekly coffee morning

and jumble sale and run raffles all the time. Last month we had a good laugh holding a funny football match between the women and the "flying pickets". We didn't raise much money but we got a lot out of our system.

We cook at home in my kitchen and so when pickets get back we have a home-baked meat pie and peas — it's called Picket Pie — and we can't cook anything else now, the men won't have it.

Some weeks we cook three or four times but because you don't always know when it's required, it's difficult to have a rota. Also you can't cope with more than two people cooking in my kitchen!

Ann Bowns interviewed in  
Socialist Organiser, August 16, 1984



Women march in London, August 11. Photo: Andrew Ward, Report.

# Build a working class women's movement!

In 1981 12 million workers were members of a trade union, of whom 30% were women.

When you look at the people in the leadership of the trade unions and of the TUC, how many women do you see?

And that's at a national level. At a local level of areas and branches, it is just as bad if not worse. In unions where the majority of

members are women, the people in the decision-making positions tend to be men.

What are the reasons for this? Many men are convinced that it's because women aren't interested: we only work for pin money anyway — it's the men who earn the family wage.

Actually the reasons are more practical

than that: meetings tend to be held at times women with families can't attend, creche facilities are not provided at meetings, and because the issues that affect women both at home, at work, their conditions, etc., are not taken seriously, or even seen as trade union issues.

Over the last few years, women have organised in the trade unions to change this situation, and the issues we have been taking up are those that enable women to attend — meeting times, creches, and positive discrimination.

Positive discrimination means encouraging women to take up positions and get involved in the union; it means that a certain number of positions in the union will be reserved for women only, to ensure that women are encouraged to be in the decision making and active role in their union.

A lot of people both on the left and right argue against positive discrimination, saying that we should vote people into positions on the basis of their politics.

## 'If we'd been organised before...'

We were saying last week how if the women in the village had been organised a couple of years ago the way we are now they would never have got those schools shut. Never. We would have fought...

We had some problems with one of the blokes at the pit here, he really is a male chauvinist pig... He comes out with 'Oh, the one with big tits'.

I mean, it was really insulting, so we had him about it, and we said we didn't like it... We said things like 'how would

you like it if we described you as the one with the little bulge in your trousers?' He just went bright red. He couldn't handle it at all. So we said, 'Well, that's how we feel'...

Coal mining is swamped in tradition, and the tradition is that it is a man's job and it's no place for a woman. But the attitudes have changed very much during the strike.

Sylvia Jackson, from Keresley (Coventry) miners' wives' committee.  
Socialist Organiser June 14 1984.

## Miners at Greenham

Three striking Notts miners visited Greenham Common peace camp on June 26. Afterwards they spoke to Angela Fraser.

'Why did you ask me to take you to Greenham?'

'To see how the women were struggling. It was an experience. I was really frightened, but I enjoyed the visit.'

'Why were you frightened?'

Because of what the media have said about them. They are not really like that...

It's like the miners. Everybody's expecting the miners to start trouble and it's the same with the women there. They are made out to be right freaks.

'Do you see any link between the miners' strike and the Greenham women's struggle?'

They're fighting for what they believe in, aren't they... They're fighting for loads of things, aren't they? They're fighting for equal rights for women. We're supposed to

have that now. Well, what can I say? It is supposed to be equal rights for women but it's always been the same — men always seem to be the most dominant. I think they're fighting to do something on their own. They need to keep men out of it because of that.

'When you go back home, will you encourage women to go and stay at Greenham?'

I don't really know — I'm not so sure.

In fact, most of the time, men get re-elected year after year on personal likes and dislikes, making the movement quite stale and not moving forward with new people or bringing in new and younger people into union activity. So positive discrimination is actually a democratic thing in that it opens it out to new people.

Secondly, such is the oppression of women in society that prevents us getting involved that we have to make special attention and arrangements to allow women to get involved.

I don't just mean meeting times and creches but also sexist attitudes we face every day which make coming to meetings and getting involved very intimidating. At union conferences you're whistled at as you walk to the rostrum; or in local branches they sneer at women and make comments about our breasts.

That is one of the issues that women organising in the union must and do take up — sexual harassment. Not only at work by management (in the typing pool, etc), but also by the union — for example nudie calendars.

Women are organising in the Labour Party and forcing it to change its politics and structure in a very small way. But there is still a long way to go.

For example, every year there is a national women's conference in the Labour Party and quite often it is a section of the Labour Party which takes up more militant positions than the rest of the party. It was, for example, the only section which opposed the sending of the Task Force to the Falklands. They supported Benn for deputy leader, they have a position of troops out of Ireland and they were one of the sections to back the moves to democratise the way the leader and deputy leader of the party are elected.

But women's conference does not have a right to put to Labour Party conference as a whole any policies that it adopts, so it's



more like a lobby than an active section of the Party.

Also, the women's conference does not have the right to vote women onto the Labour Party National Executive Committee.

### The women's movement

Meanwhile, the women's movement from the 1960s to the present, has tended to be a middle class movement. It does take up issues that should concern all working class women such as the right to abortion — control over our own bodies — the questions of sexuality and gay and lesbian liberation, the right to walk the streets without fear of attack, against the portrayal by the police and courts of victims of rape as if they asked for it, etc.

But to a large extent the movement has organised in a way which does not attract working class women. Women's movement meetings tend to be consciousness-raising groups, and many elements in the women's

movement refuse to have anything to do with the Labour Party or the unions because they see them as male-dominated.

Consciousness-raising is all right. It is necessary for every woman to be able to meet other women and discuss their oppression and talk about how they are isolated in the home and how the law discriminates against them. But if you stop at just talking about it and don't put those ideas into action and force the labour movement to take them up, it becomes a futile exercise.

The miners' strike opens up the possibility of breaking down this division between a male-dominated labour movement and a middle-class women's movement — of building a working-class based women's movement.

The miners' strike and particularly the women's involvement in it, forces the labour movement to see women as political, active, militant people who don't just sit at home and soak in the media, or just work for pin money or can be treated as mere sex objects. It really does challenge all those attitudes which the male labour movement has lived by for years.

We need to discuss how that challenge to men's attitudes can be sustained after the strike has been won. How do we make sure that those lessons learned during the strike (like the men who now tell other men to shut up when they come out with "Get your tits out", and the men in the labour movement who can no longer say "women aren't interested in politics, they just organise get back to work movements" and things like that) aren't forgotten but become a way of changing the labour movement into one which includes women and seriously takes up women's issues?

And also how do we use the lessons to make the women's movement a movement for working class women rather than middle class consciousness-raising groups?

## Women in the labour movement

The growth of women's support groups since the start of the miners' strike has been a tremendous boost to the women's movement in Britain. The Tory government have not been able to buy them off or use them as propaganda against the NUM.

Their courageous stand has given confidence to working class women everywhere who, over the years, have been attacked by the policies of cuts, redundancies, extra police powers and media lies.

All the women involved in WAPC are determined that their groups will not just

disappear when the miners' strike is over, because there are still so many battles to be fought.

The only way that this can be ensured is if all working class women in struggle join together and fight together — not just against the Tories' attacks which throw us out of work and treat us as second class citizens, but also to force the labour movement to take our battles seriously and to give us equal voice.

The militant action of working class women can only strengthen the labour movement and democratise it.

Socialist Organiser, January 9, 1985