

Coalfield Women at the Face

A roundtable discussion

The participants in the roundtable are: Kath Mackey, who works in a community based project, lives in Sheffield, is active in Sheffield Women Against Pit Closures, and is a member of the Communist Party; Elaine Rose, who is a housewife, lives in Sheffield and whose husband works at Brookhouse Colliery; and Kate Whiteside who lives in Chesterfield, is a member of the Labour Party and whose husband works at Markham Colliery. It is chaired by Vicky Seddon, a member of the South Yorkshire Area Committee of the Communist Party.

Elaine, I think you're new to being involved in industrial struggle, how did you get involved?

Elaine Well first of all I went down to the main NUM headquarters, and just sat, watched and listened. And within a fortnight, we'd got this women's organisation at our pit, Brookhouse. Since then we've done everything; we've been on picket lines, helped with the food parcels, jumble sales, been out collecting.

What about you Kate? You are involved in the Labour Party? How did you get involved in support work?

Kate Well, primarily because I'm a miner's wife and we'd already got a women's group, which had just been formed for Tony Benn's byelection in Chesterfield which preceded the strike by about a week. We decided to divert all our energies to supporting the miners. We felt it was imperative to get as much support and education in the mining communities as possible.

You're not a miner's wife, Kath, but you've become involved quite heavily in this work. How did you get into it?

Kath Through being involved in previous disputes. I come from a steelworking family and my husband has been in many disputes. Last year he was in a dispute which lasted maybe 10-11 weeks against enforced redundancies, like the miners. So I have an insight into what it's like to be without benefits, help and money. It was a chance to look at how we could involve many different kinds of people from different walks of life. This is what we've tried to do in Sheffield which, being an industrial base, provides many opportunities.

So when you were thinking about setting up an organisation to do solidarity work, you decided on a women's group. Why a women's group and not a mixed group?

Kath We felt that as women we had to find some level at which we could involve almost every woman in the mining villages and within Sheffield, so that they could feel that they had a part to play in this dispute. We tried to find ways of offering practical support to the miners and their families, especially as, being about jobs, we knew it was going to be a long struggle. By trying to involve people in practical support for the miners, we've

involved all kinds: nurses, school teachers, housewives, students, unemployed women engineering workers, women bus drivers, women who had never thought that they had a part to play in such things, especially in jobs and communities with very traditional ways of doing things.

It sounds as if some of the first things that people got involved with were those traditionally regarded as women's roles. And yet you've also moved into much more directly related areas, like picketing. What has the attitude of the miners been towards that change?

Elaine Most of them have given full support, but you get the odd one or two who say women shouldn't be on the picket line.

One of the things I've found when knocking on doors trying to collect food for miners' families, is one or two miners who have said that they themselves are too frightened to go on a picket line. Were you frightened?

Elaine Oh yes. But for some unknown reason this courage came up and I wanted to be there. I wanted to see what was going on and feel the atmosphere. It's been marvellous. The men all sticking together, it's like one big family.

Kate The morale is something to be seen. There has been a sort of re-birth of the community spirit that was traditional in mining communities and which had been lost. A lot of us thought it was dead and gone, but that's not so. It's been fantastic. We were viewed with caution when we went at first. Initially we took soup to the pickets because it was cold in March on the picket lines. The reaction from the lads on the picket line was that at least some women understand, especially because a lot of hostile women had been shown on television. At our first meeting, in a little mining village near Markham Colliery where my husband works, we were overwhelmed with the number of women that turned up. And from there it snowballed. In Derbyshire there must now be hundreds of women involved, not that we've had to organise them all, they're quite capable of organising themselves, once the initial idea is put to them.

That's quite a new thing for those communities.

Kate It's something that's never happened before, and a lot of the women involved weren't politically aware before. I'd hazard a guess that some of them have never even voted before.

Is it very different working in groups with women who have never been politically involved before, from working in the traditional labour movement?

Kate Oh yes. I'm sure this is every socialist's dream, to be able to work in the community, to work with ordinary working class people, to get your message across.

Are there problems as well?

Kate Yes. At the beginning of the strike a lot of women (and miners as well) said it's not a political strike. But once they appreciate what is happening they understand what the Government is doing. They know all about the kids that are getting cut in nursery schools, the health service, the five million on the dole — they understand all that. But they don't think that it involves them politically, they don't think that they are capable of being involved in politics. And they are.

And yet maybe a year ago they wouldn't have thought they were capable of being involved in the way they are now.

Kate No. I'm sure they wouldn't.

Is that true for you, Elaine?

Elaine Oh yes. All I've done is been a housewife and looked after children. This has been an enormous change in my life. I haven't got a minute to spare. The children aren't neglected, they're both at school and grandma is always handy.



Why are women involved this time in a completely new way?

Kath So much has happened over the last five years, particularly in the north of England: there's so much unemployment; our standard of living has decreased so much; differences within the working class, between people who are and aren't working; the losses suffered by the labour movement. People feel the need to act. And while it's not been publicised so much, it's affected women as well. Women want to work too. Younger women are having their children at an earlier age: they are still at an age where they want to go out and do something which is of value. In the north, you see, a lot of women have been involved in recent years in tenants' associations, community organisations, fighting school closures and so on.

You seem to be saying that women are generally just much more visible as activists. That isn't something that is just related to this strike, although it has flowered in this dispute amongst working class women.

Elaine I think it's because half the time we haven't had a chance. All you need is a push, and you're on your way. When this is all finished, I don't know what's going to happen to me, you know. It's been great all these women getting together. . .

You didn't think you had it in yourselves?

Elaine No. Even coming here tonight and doing this. I've never done it, never had a chance. I love it! It's great!

When women do start being active outside the home, it always seems to me that it starts to have some kind of effect on what is happening at home. A change in one seems to imply a change in the other.

Elaine At our home we share. He helps me wash pots, helps me get the kids ready for bed and he hoovers up.

Is that new?

Elaine Yes it is. He'd only, say, wash pots on Sunday dinner and now he's helping, even with the cooking! We just work together, and it's brought us closer, it really has.

Has that been happening in Chesterfield, Kate, more sharing of domestic responsibilities?

Kate Yes. It took a bit of accepting sometimes on the part of some of the men but. . .

Especially the older ones. . . ?

Kate I would say so. But even with some of the younger ones, their wives have just stayed home, especially if they've never worked, and they've just been housewives looking after the children. Now they've got involved during this dispute and suddenly, as Elaine says, they're independent and standing on their own two feet. They are very capable women and they've never had the opportunity before to go to public meetings, make speeches, go round factories collecting money. And like it or not, the men have had to accept this. And it has changed a lot of men's attitudes to the role of women. I'm certain that a lot of women don't intend for it to die when this dispute is over.

But it takes more than one dispute to make those kinds of changes permanent. What kinds of changes do you think there will be?

Kate I think changes have already occurred during the past three months. It'll be very difficult after the dispute for these women to just go home and start cleaning the windows. I'm sure what was needed, as Elaine said, was just that push, the opportunity for them to do something and find that they were capable of doing it. I'm sure that will continue after. They'll involve themselves in different things. And I'm sure the community spirit will be revived because now everybody is helping each other in mining communities. I'm sure the women's role in this dispute will never be forgotten because it's been so important and vital. And it certainly is recognised by union officials and the miners themselves.

/ was going to ask you a bit about how the women's organisations have worked with and been welcomed or otherwise by the unions.

Kath The Sheffield Women Against Pit Closures Group was set up as women not actually from mining areas. But they obviously went out into the areas and helped to try and get women involved. And women after that didn't need encouragement, they got on with the job themselves. Our negotiations with the NUM have been very good at all levels, particularly in the Yorkshire area. We have had a good response from them and much support in what we've been doing. Then again, at a very local level in the mining areas, there's obviously been teething problems, you can't expect a traditional industry to accept immediately what some of the women were actually doing. You know, they were challenging the NUM in the sense that it was dominated by men.

You mean this was a kind of separate organisation that wasn't under the control of the NUM?

Kath Well of course. Our Sheffield Women's Group always tried to work in relation to the NUM and its policy, because it is the NUM's dispute. We are supporting them every bit of the way and developing activity and action. The women developed so quickly in this environment, and the men did find it threatening. But I think they're getting over that and the men respect the women and they see them as a force. They can't not see them now, because there are so many groups that have sprung up in the areas. And when they actually come together, like they did at Barnsley, well I've never been to any kind of rally that meant so much, some 10,000 women, and the media just disregarded it totally. All they showed was Arthur Scargill and a few women kissing and greeting Arthur.

You mean the idea of 10,000 women being there doing something was so challenging to the way that women are usually seen.

Kath Oh, it was completely threatening I would think. And I would feel that some of the men felt it threatening, all those women together in one place. But it wasn't only threatening to men, but also to Margaret Thatcher and her Victorian values.

One of the things that I've heard women talk about when they've been on picket lines, especially when they've also been to Greenham and seen the ways the women there have challenged the police by lying down and singing, is that these non-traditional forms haven't yet been

adopted as tactics on the picket lines here.

Elaine I don't think we would get a chance to use such tactics. The police just come like swarms of bees.

Kate When we've been picketing, we do sing. And the police don't quite know what to do with you. They look at you as though you're not quite right. But as to other forms of non-violent demonstrating, it's impossible because of the sheer numbers of police. There isn't an opportunity to do even what the Greenham women do, like lying down. But we do sing because it's a lot more effective than shouting and bawling. At the beginning, like with the soup wagon, the police never bothered us. They never took our car numbers. Eventually they did take the van number, but they never stopped us. That's changed now, they do stop the soup wagon and move it on. Initially I think the police pretended we weren't there because if women had been arrested it'd have been in the media that women were supporting the strike. It was a deliberate tactic. Up until halfway through the strike, we didn't get any press coverage at all. Now I think every women's group in the country is absolutely inundated with the television, radio, papers, wanting to do an interview. The attitude of the police has certainly changed towards the women now. We had quite a good rapport with the local police. But that has changed and it's very frightening, it can be very aggressive.

Elaine Well you're one of the men now, aren't you, in their eyes?

Kate There's no distinction between men and women.

The work you've taken on board, the distribution of food and money, has been colossal. Collecting food in a place like Sheffield and making sure that all the pits in the South Yorkshire area are getting some, and the same in Derbyshire, that is a tremendous job of organisation. It's not just flag waving. It must take a tremendous amount of very detailed, meticulous planning.

Kath The first time we did a street collection in Sheffield with women from maybe four mining areas, the women were quite frightened at just having to ask for food on a public street. This is something which is totally out of their horizon, they've never anticipated doing anything like that at all. They have moved from being scared stiff to actually ask somebody on the street for money and food to putting forward a political argument at a meeting.

What's going to happen when the dispute is won; what's going to happen to that organisation? Will it fold or will it carry on, will there be a permanent purpose for it?

Elaine I hope it carries on. After all these weeks of being together and being so close and helping each other out, I don't think that it can end after it.

Kath I think women through the miners' dispute have now seen that they have a totally different role to play and hopefully the men will see women's role differently too.

Kate I think women will be so much stronger in their own lives, in their own families, in their own jobs. You have so much more confidence.