

indicate the way in which the present government has created an environment in which any political activity with which it disagrees is marked out as marginal and thus a legitimate target of police harassment. One such target has been the thousands of people collecting in the street for the miners and their dependants.

The earliest recorded incidents of collectors being stopped was in mid-May in Glasgow where people were told they needed a licence and were breaking a number of detailed regulations. A little while later a similar warning was given to collectors in St Austell, in Cornwall. Since then, wherever collections have taken place reports have been made of the police either telling collectors to stop or arresting them. There have been reports of at least 35 serious incidents



of police harassment in London alone and from these, 21 arrests or cautions between the beginning of June and end of August.

Collectors have not known how seriously to take police warnings. A mild rebuke by one officer may be swiftly followed by arrests by others. This was the case in Croydon where a District Support Unit (SPG-style local police) descended upon collectors and arrested two of them shortly after an amicable warning and accommodation had been reached with a patrolling constable. In the London borough of Southwark the miners' solidarity group were told they couldn't even use the forecourt of the Labour Party head-

quarters for their collection, while in neighbouring Lambeth the police commander, meeting the trades council, acknowledged their right to collect from council property.

Support groups have responded in a variety of ways. Early in June when problems arose in two South London boroughs a well-organised protest by local MPs, Labour councillors and the trades council secured a retreat and apology from the local police. Where two collectors had been arrested for obstruction, three days later, 100 people mounted a mass fund-raising with impunity.

In some areas council property has been used as a collection point. (In Greater Manchester public libraries are allocated for such.) In others market stalls have been used, although Labour Party workers on Portobello Road market in London's Notting Hill were challenged while selling *The Miner* and stickers because the police officer believed they were not 'substantial enough' to constitute merchandise.

When meeting the organisers of collections senior police officers have usually appeared 'reasonable' and accepted that collections should be allowed to take place. In the London borough of Lambeth an agreement was reached that food collection was quite proper, that council property could be used for the collection of money and that money should not be confiscated by the police. There have been a number of similar meetings elsewhere with the result that some prosecutions have been dropped. However in other areas (like the London boroughs of Brent and Hackney) the problems continue.

It is tempting to see here the consequences of a political directive 'from on high'. Although this may be possible, the most likely explanation is rather more complex, revealing of the way the police operate, and at the same time more disturbing. In view of the fact that many police officers have been involved in riot-style duties with pickets during the miners' dispute and in other aspects of the mutual-aid operation it is hardly surprising to find some patrolling officers attempting to prevent miners collections.

This is in line with the findings of a report by the Police Studies Institute¹ that patrolling police were barely supervised, once out of the station they were largely free to act on their own initiative. Arrests are made and they are justified later. In no area is this freedom to act in an arbitrary way clearer than in public order issues. It is the problem of a force 'out of control' and urgently demands democratic limitations.

The law about street collection is not

• POLICING STREET COLLECTORS

The miners' dispute has brought a huge police operation which has seriously encroached on civil liberties. By far the biggest impact has of course been on the miners themselves. However, in a less publicised way, it has spread far beyond them. This may

complicated but the police do have a wide range of other powers which enable them to interfere as much as they wish. The collection of food and money at a public meeting in the open air is quite legal. Senior officers have openly recognised this. The relevant law (1916 Police Factories etc Miscellaneous Provisions Act) doesn't refer to the collection of food at all. The police have also tried to use the 1824 Vagrancy Act to charge people with 'begging'. However, cases in 1881 and 1914 in similar circumstances, involving collections for striking miners and for building workers found that trade unionists were not the 'idle and disorderly persons' the Act aimed to control. These prosecutions then are unlikely to succeed.

Other street collections of money require a permit normally obtainable from a local authority. In the Metropolitan Police area this comes from the Commissioner via a committee which meets every autumn to agree a timetable for the following year for major charities. The slots available for local appeals are unsuitable for miners' fundraising. Miners' support committees applying for these licences can expect no help here. They are trapped - no (legal) collection without an (unavailable) licence. Speaking on behalf of the GLC police committee in July, Paul

Boateng pointed out that the police are not the appropriate authority to issue such licences in any case. This should be the elected local body.


Where the police have not been able to charge collectors under these regulations they have fallen back on the classic public order charges like 'obstruction' (of the highway or of the police), behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace, threatening words or behaviour and so on. These charges are arbitrary and difficult to defend.

We can expect to hear further on these issues. A major Home Office review of public order legislation, including the 1936 Public

Order Act, is due this autumn. It is likely to include some changes in the right to demonstrate outside embassies, changes in the regulations of 'public meetings' and rallies and a requirement to give notice of the intent to hold demonstrations.²

Cathie Lloyd

PSI report *The Police and People in London* especially Vol IV 'The Police in Action' 1983. Local Acts already require notice to be given in about ten counties and boroughs in England and Wales. The Home Office suggested in 1980 that if this became a general requirement it would be most appropriate to notify the police rather than the local authority.



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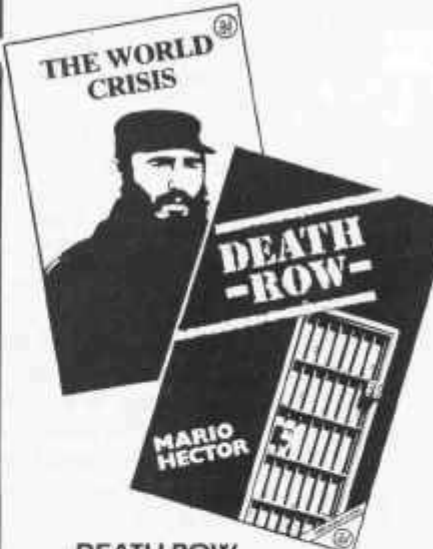
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