

Resources of Hope and Pride

1992-2015

1992 was a defining moment in the long decline of the NUM and the nationalised coal industry. The failure to return a Labour government earlier in the year meant that coal privatisation was inevitable. There was a brief, yet remarkable, flourish of solidarity and indignation, an echo of 1984-85, when a massive London demonstration in September protested against a final round of pit closures which had been conceived by the Conservative Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Heseltine.

But that was not the end of the story. This chapter tells the story of some of the struggles that have carried on, or been revisited.

Tower Colliery and local regeneration

In the decade after the 1984-85 struggle, transferred skilled miners and craftsmen, all seasonal trade unionists, gathered at Tower for what was to be the inevitable last stand. Phil White from St John's in the Llynfi Valley, Dai 'Ropey' Davies from Penrhiwceiber in the Cynon Valley, Graham Taylor from Maerdy in the Rhondda Fach, Ken Williams from Lewis Merthyr in the Rhondda Fawr, Wayne Thomas from Abernant in the Swansea Valley and Dave Proctor from Durham joined such local veteran campaigners as Tyrone O'Sullivan and

Glyn Roberts to enrich the local leadership with their diverse industrial, political and community experiences. By the early 1990s Tower had become a microcosm of the whole South Wales coalfield, drawing its workforce from Pontypool in the East to the Gwendraeth Valley in the West.

Despite all the protests, the Government had achieved its closures and ultimately the privatisation of the industry. But Tower had not given up. It had been in the vanguard of the struggle in 1992, as in 1984-85. By April 1994 it was the last deep mine in South Wales. Under privatisation the workforce believed there was a conspiracy to close this profitable mine. In what became known as the 'Fourteen Days that Shook Britain', a public campaign across the country to save the mine culminated in a march of 280 miles to London and a stay-in strike by local Labour MP Ann Clwyd and veteran Tower miner Glyn Roberts.

Thousands of letters and many donations were received in this period. Remarkably, the threat of closure was withdrawn, but ultimately British Coal forced the lodge to make the tactical retreat of accepting redundancies, because new work practices resulted in drastic reduction in wages. But at no time did they accept the closure, which ultimately came on 23 April.

The struggle now moved on to preparing for the impossible dream of a workers' buy-out of the privatised mine. Cynon Valley Borough Council provided rent-free offices for the campaign, professional support came from the Wales Co-operative Centre, and enormous public backing was received from all those who had benefitted from Tower's solidarity in the past. Two million pounds was raised by the 239 miners who had pledged £8000 each from their redundancy payments to achieve the buy-out.

The success of the Tower Employees Buy-out (TEBO) in winning the tender in October 1994, and its subsequent successes in meeting productivity targets and winning new

markets locally and overseas, were very much in the spirit of the struggles of previous generations: the linking of eternal vigilance to economic freedom had now come full circle.

On 23 December 1994, ownership of Tower Colliery passed from British Coal to Goitre Tower Anthracite Ltd, the new name under which TEBO would operate. On 2 January 1995, Tower miners, their families and many supporters marched back to the pit to take over its ownership. It was an inspiring and emotional occasion, full of political irony and paradox: the workers took control of Tower as the rest of the industry was privatised. As one old miner remarked:

This is better than 1947. Then the Government became the owners but now it's the miners at last. Then they flew the Union Jack over Tower but now we are flying the red dragon of Wales ...

TEBO was led by the seemingly unlikely combination of Philip Weekes, former Area Director of the National Coal Board in South Wales, and the Tower lodge secretary Tyrone O'Sullivan. These fellow socialists had found a 'third way', very much in the tradition and history of the pit, its community and much of Wales itself. Tower had now become a beacon for others struggling for economic and community survival: its commitment to the policies of community enterprise and sustainable development was but a modern version of the valleys' collectivist community traditions. And its commitment to local cultural, sporting and charitable causes set an ethical example for other employers to follow. Its support in particular for the revival of the South Wales Miners' Eisteddfod had been a heart-warming initiative.

The closure of Tower in 2008 through the natural exhaustion of coal reserves, after fourteen years of a profitable co-operative enterprise, coincided with an upturn in coal

demand world-wide. Tower miners were transferred to two local mines, Unity and Pentreclwydau, in the Neath Valley. There was also the prospect of a new Corus/Tata drift mine at Margam, whose plans under the late Philip Weekes had been abandoned in 1987.

The community and co-operative ethos of Tower was replicated in many initiatives across the South Wales valleys, often encouraged by the Wales Co-operative Centre that had already given vital financial guidance to Tower. In 1996, on the eve of the return of a Labour Government, the Valleys Initiative for Adult Education (VIAE) reviewed in *Chasing the Dragon* the range of community responses to the long crisis in the South Wales coalfield.

Some of these initiatives, such as the DOVE women training co-operative at Banwen in the Dulais Valley, grew directly out of the experiences of 1984-85. Raymond Williams referred to the resources of hope that we derived during that struggle – the common use and special meaning attached by striking miners and women supporters to such key words as ‘community’, ‘culture’, ‘democracy’ and ‘co-operation’.

The election and re-election of Labour governments after 1997, and the creation through democratic devolution of the Welsh government, did begin to address the deep levels of social and economic deprivation caused by the collapse of the coal industry following the defeat of 1985. The establishment of the Coalfield Regeneration Trust, the securing of European Objective One Status for West Wales and the Valleys (and its successor Convergence Funding), and the setting up of the first Social Justice Department by the Welsh Government, located in Merthyr Tydfil, have all been important policy initiatives. However, these initiatives are being undermined by the current regime of austerity.

The Welsh Government has placed great importance on the economic regeneration of valleys communities, centring

initially on the Heads of the Valleys Programme in 2004, its *Turning Heads* strategy in 2006, and later its West Wales Valleys Strategy. But much greater public investment was needed and, as Dr Victoria Winckler, the Director of the Bevan Foundation, stated in 2008, very much in the spirit of the democratic impulses of 1984-85:

... the programme needs to engage more effectively with people within the heads of the valleys area. The programme must not be imposed from above – it needs to be owned, and have the belief of, the people whom it is supposed to serve.

Revisiting the strike

In 2014, the release of the film *Pride*, and the performance of the play *Pits and Perverts*, reminded us all locally of very personal memories and experiences which connect to our collective past, none more so than Philip and Marilyn James, then of Coelbren, now of Seven Sisters in the Dulais Valley.

On 18 June 1984, Philip James, a Treforgan striking miner, was arrested at Orgreave Coke Depot. He was charged with unlawful assembly, and later rioting – along with pickets from many other coalfields. The case ultimately collapsed, and many years later he was given compensation. In 1997, Philip was one of the speakers at the launch of the Yes for Wales Devolution Campaign at Cardiff Castle.

Philip's wife Marilyn was one of the leading women activists organising food distribution in their home village of Coelbren and more widely across our three valleys. Towards the end of the strike she was one of the founders of the Dove Women's Training Workshop. Philip and Marilyn were always amongst the first to welcome supporters of all kinds who came to bring food, money and solidarity to our valleys in 1984-85.

And the welcome was the same when the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners group came to stay: they were to be treated no differently from Leicester's 'Dirty Thirty', Brent Nalgo, school teachers from Cornwall, Irish trade unionists, Welsh language activists from North Wales, London print workers or even internationally recognised socialist feminists such as Sheila Rowbotham or US Labour historians such as John Gaventa.

In September 2014, Philip and Marilyn attended the Valleys' premiere of both the film *Pride* and the stage play *Pits and Perverts*, at nearby Ystradgynlais Miners' Welfare Hall. Thirty years earlier the Hall had been one of the local food distribution centres for the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valleys Miners' Support Group. The audience was partly made up of those who were directly involved in the momentous struggle of 1984-5; but also present, crucially, was a new generation, who knew little of those times, the reasons for the strike, and why gays, lesbians and so many others became our allies, our friends and our comrades.

As well as bringing back memories of solidarity, the film and play were a salutary reminder of the determination of the British state, in all its manifestations, to defeat the National Union of Mineworkers. Recently there has emerged new evidence of the state's role in the strike, in the form of newly released Cabinet papers and new allegations involving the role of the South Yorkshire Police in falsifying statements against picketing striking miners at the Orgreave Coal Depot. The South Yorkshire Police has referred itself to the Independent Police Complaints Commission following allegations of 'assault, perjury, perverting the course of justice and misconduct in public office' (see *Guardian*, 22 November 2012).

Thirty years ago, however, the advance of the British state was momentarily halted at Ystradgynlais, when we successfully challenged the sequestration of our support group funds by the

accountancy firm Price Waterhouse, acting on behalf of the High Court.

Recently released Cabinet papers (as reported in the *Guardian*, 13 December 2014) have revealed that the MI5 officer working undercover inside Price Waterhouse was using phone-tapped information relating to NUM funds. Our funds were not part of the NUM, but they were also seized. Notes deposited at the South Wales Miners' Library show that the local branch of Barclays Bank could not provide a legal reason why the funds had been frozen by Price Waterhouse, even though the account was completely separate from the NUM. The verbatim notes compiled by our legal advisor, university lecturer Phil Thomas (later Professor of Law at Cardiff), show that with his assistance our funds were returned to us and deposited elsewhere.

As well as re-examining the role of the state in the strike, it is also important to rediscover the unique political alliances which were forged during that period, and helped sustain this struggle for such a long time.

Some of the intriguing alliances to be created involved the Welsh Language Society (*Gymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*) in North West Wales, which linked up in particular with the Dulais Valley, through the campaigning of Ali Thomas, and also with the village of Gwaun-cae-gurwen. It has been calculated that during the strike over fifty Welsh-speaking communities – including some very small villages such as Deiniolen, Felinheli, Bethel and Waunfawr – collected food and money to support the miners and their families. Gwyn Edwards of the trade union group of *Gymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* wrote:

As socialists, who care for the future of our language and our culture, the Welsh Language Society resolve to oppose this Government and to defend the working class communities in Wales.

These North-South, all-Wales links helped create a new national movement through the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities, whose existence lasted only from 1984 to 1986. But there is no doubt that the Congress was an important factor in the forging of a national consciousness of a new kind, which led to the successful 'Yes' Devolution vote in 1997. These links were a reminder of powerful solidarities from the past. During the North Wales quarrymen's lockout at the beginning of the twentieth century there had been considerable support from the South Wales Miners' Federation. And after the lockout, many quarrymen from the North came to work in South Wales pits, not least at Nine Mile Point, bringing with them to the workplace their language, culture and 'bloody awkward ways', as the historian Alun Burge remarked to me recently.

At an international level, the cultural links built by the South Wales Striking Miners' Choir with the Irish Trade Union movement were continued in the decades after 1984-85 by Cor Meibion yr Onllwyn (one of the founding choirs of the 'strike' choir). These were largely sustained by trade union activist, poet and historian Francis Devine, who had drawn on his contacts from the 1970s with the Welsh and Irish Labour History Societies.

Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners

One other alliance, justifiably considered by many of those involved to be the most remarkable, was that which was created, nurtured and sustained between the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners Group (LGSM) in London and the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valley Support Group in the South Wales Coalfield. Thanks to playwright Micheál Kerrigan and the script development by Patricia Byrne, for *Pits and Perverts*,

first performed in 2013 when it toured Northern Ireland, and writer Steven Beresford's film *Pride*, released in September 2014, that alliance has now achieved a wider, indeed universal, recognition.

It is also to be welcomed that a better and deeper historical understanding has been achieved through the research of Diarmaid Kelliher, in his illuminating and ground-breaking article 'Solidarity and Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners 1984-85' in *History Workshop Journal* (Spring 2014). Among other issues, Kelliher has addressed the ways in which 'the concept of class, community and oppression were employed to explain this alliance'.

For me, as an historian and as an activist in the strike at the local level, *Pits and Perverts* and *Pride* brought new ways of understanding the alliance. Neither, of course, were historical documentaries, nor sought to be. The former powerfully portrayed the linkages between the oppression of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, the gay community and the mining community, whilst the latter is witness to the strike from the gay and lesbian perspective.

For those directly involved in the Dulais Valley, a number of factors, both historical and political, need, however, to be acknowledged. Firstly, the alliance was not in any way accidental. The minutes of the LGSM (now lodged at the People's History Museum in Manchester) and the minutes of the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valleys Miners' Support Group (located at the Richard Burton Archives at Swansea University), as well as memories of activists from the time, reveal a clear and deliberate political strategy to link the two movements and forge an alliance between the gay community and the mining community.

Huw Williams, then a Communist Party member and a founder of LGSM, recently confirmed my own memory that the Communist Party, with its strategy of building a 'broad

democratic alliance' against the Conservative government, helped provide the link between the LGSM and the Dulais Valley, after discussions Huw had with the industrial organiser of the Communist Party. David Richards, Secretary of the Communist Party in Wales, then made the call to me as chair of the local support group. Key to all of this was the communist Mark Ashton (a co-founder of LGSM and the driving force in making the Dulais Valley link), whose political affiliation and motivation is central to these developments but is not acknowledged, indeed is obscured, in the film.

There was to be a clear political undertaking: giving and receiving money was not enough. It had to be publicly recognised, and an alliance had to be initiated and sustained. Crucially, all this was carried out at the subsequent support group meetings which I chaired on 14 and 21 October. The support group was well versed in welcoming and building alliances of all kinds, although this one might have seemed to some to have been different.

At no time, then or subsequently, were any openly homophobic attitudes expressed in our locality. This is contrary to the film's apparently 'necessary' dramatic portrayal of open hostility at the beginning of the relationship, and the fictional collapse of the alliance later: neither actually took place, nor was there an 'informer', as depicted in the film in the character of Marlene. Further historical research needs to be undertaken to question the stereotyping of mining communities in *Pride* as being homophobic, intolerant and bigoted: if we had been how could we have sustained the alliance?

That said, *Pride* gets very near to some of the subliminal homophobic attitudes evident in our second meeting. The minutes faithfully recorded by our secretary, Hefina Headon, tell a story of deliberate and determined political and cultural alliance building, an instance of Antonio Gramsci's 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will':

October 14th: Letter from Lesbians and Gays asking for a speaker on 19th October. They have donated £1200. Hywel asked for a volunteer. John nominated Hywel. Hywel said Dane Hartwell will be in London and he will ask him ... Margaret stated there will be 30 of them coming down on 26th October and asked for a list of people who will accommodate them.

October 21st: Margaret reported that the accommodation for the gays and lesbians arriving next weekend had all been arranged. Islwyn felt that people would be going to the Onllwyn Club on Saturday night for the wrong reasons. He said that Onllwyn Club had no knowledge of the concert. David clarified that the arrangements had been made and that Ali and John Val were aware of this. Hywel said that he and Margaret would speak to John Evans after the meeting. David stated that Lesbians and Gays were members of the working class, and that he felt that it was possibly a storm in a teacup, Frank endorsed this wholeheartedly.

David Donovan, the coal washery worker and TGWU activist, who was ultimately to make the connection for us in London, on 19 October 2014, and his then wife Margaret, a leading campaigner from the earliest days who was the prime mover in creating a distinct autonomous women's group alongside the support group, were the key players in forging the alliance locally.

At the London end of the alliance, the LGSM had been formed on 15 July 2014, and was made up overwhelmingly of highly political people, either Communist or Labour in outlook or membership. The minutes of the inaugural meeting decided to produce a leaflet to inform people of the facts of the dispute and explain the relevance of the miners' struggle to lesbian and gay liberation. The LGSM mirrored the political determination of the Miners' Support Group with which they chose to twin.

After the visit to the coalfield, Mark Ashton reported to the LGSM that it was ‘the best experience of his life’ (the minute taker, Mike Jackson, added ‘Mine too!’).

Whilst communists like Mark Ashton and Huw Williams provided some of the political direction, the inaugural meeting acknowledged the importance of the Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay rights by ‘following the lines of the LCLGR constitution’. In a recent interview with Mike Jackson, co-founder of the LGSM (on 10 November 2014), these political origins were confirmed:

... there was a Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights, LCLGR, and from what I can gather, there was a Labour Party youth group, and there was a Lesbian and Gay young socialists, they were all starting to collect for the miners, but from what I can gather it wasn't terribly coherent ... what I do remember is, I bumped into Mark Ashton in King's Cross Station very shortly before the Gay Pride March in 1984, and Mark, just off the cuff, said ‘do you want to take a bucket to the Pride March on Saturday and we'll collect for the miners?’ and I said ‘great idea’.

As if to confirm this wider political perspective, there is evidence in the LGSM minutes to indicate solidarity action beyond the Dulais Valley. At a fringe meeting of the LCLGR at the Labour Party Conference on 2 October 2014, the following message was received from the NUM:

We support civil liberties and the struggle of lesbian and gay people. We welcome the links forged in South Wales and other areas. Our struggle is yours. Victory to the miners.

A month later the Lesbian and Gay Socialist conference in Edinburgh, on 24 and 25 November, sent a solidarity birthday

card to the imprisoned striking miner and later Labour MP David Hamilton. The card was signed by all the delegates, some with red lipstick.

In the month leading up to Christmas 1984 and into the New Year, over £50,000 was received in donations by our support group. The bulk of this came from the LGSM and print unions in London. The momentum was provided by alliances which defined culture and community in their broadest terms, as in Raymond Williams's 'Resources of Hope'. The South Wales Striking Miners' Choir and the South Wales Striking Miners' Rugby Team both had their origins in our support group. The highlights of this period were the 'Shoulder to Shoulder' concert by the choir at Hornsey Town Hall, and the Bronski Beat 'Pits and Perverts' concert with Jimmy Somerville along with the 'Flying Pickets' at Treorchy.

It can, however, be argued that the real alliance with the gays and lesbians was not with the striking miners, who were for the most part passive participants, but with the women activists within the support group. They provided the actual leadership in the locality, not only in the remarkable food distribution they organised but in more overtly political activity such as attendance at community picket lines, the two occupations of Cynheidre Colliery, and in building and sustaining the alliance with LGSM. Our secretary Hefina Headon, who spoke at the massive Afan Lido rally, and Women's Group coordinator Margaret Donovan, became leading figures across the coalfield, as did future Labour MP Sian James, especially in her campaigning on behalf of sacked miners in the Justice for Mineworkers campaign.

There is no doubt that local striking miners seemed more comfortable in building the equally effective but less challenging alliances – with London print workers, with Irish trade unionists and with Welsh language activists. It was left to the women rather than the men to take the lead with the

LGSM, though strongly supported by David Donovan. Mike Jackson recently acknowledged that 'heterosexual men were always the problem'. That said, however, they did not resist, and, significantly, they participated in the Gay Pride March in London of 1985, where the Blaenant NUM lodge banner was prominently displayed.

Other alliances and campaigns

Another aspect of the struggle in our locality and throughout our coalfield was the linking with black and minority ethnic groups in London. The very first London donations to the support group came from the black community in Broadwater Farm in North London. I well recall the occasion when Phil Bowen, chair of the Blaenant NUM Lodge, reported to our support group that he had successfully collected a significant amount of money from that community, and had also established links in the nearby Turkish community. He came back full of enthusiasm for both communities, and in particular for the Kurdish cause and the need (prophetically) for a Human Rights Act.

After the strike, these links were remembered, and a young black woman, Mary John Baptiste, representing the Broadwater Farm community, was invited to speak at the South Wales Area NUM Annual Conference in 1986. Hefina Headon and I met her at Neath Railway Station and took her to the conference. She was very nervous, but Hefina encouraged her by saying simply, 'be proud!' In other words, she should be proud of her own community and its history, and the way in which it responded to ours.

Of all the valleys in the South Wales Coalfield, the Dulais Valley has the most benign and lasting legacies from the strike, and all these legacies involve women. The successful Dove

workshop – a training and educational centre with a nursery, a café and a community garden – has as its chair Glynis Howell, the wife of a striking miner in 1984-85; Gill Watts, daughter of a striking miner, is today the café manager, and Jill Douglas, sister of two striking miners, is the nursery manager. The Dulais Valley Divas is a new women's choir, whose founding members include Jill Douglas and Kay Bowen, who was the main food coordinator of the strike when it was supporting over one thousand families. This is one of the more significant cultural developments in the valleys today.

And then there is the Seven Sisters Women's Rugby team, successfully led by its captain, Bethan Kelland-Howell, daughter of a striking miner. Bethan is an Ospreys player as well as a Welsh International Cap, and is also a gay icon in the locality. A women's youth team has also recently been established, indicating that this unique women's valley community initiative is flourishing and growing.

The crucial autonomous women's role, so evident in the alliance with our gay and lesbian supporters, is perhaps the real story and legacy of the strike. *Pits and Perverts* and *Pride* have shown the way in telling one part of the story. A film from the women's perspective would be a fitting sequel, to tell of another important aspect of the struggle.

The more we revisit the events of 1984-85, the more we can explore the claim made in this book, that in *making* history, history was on our side. With the passing of time, it has become increasingly evident that a vital industry – coal – and a vital institution – the South Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers – were all but destroyed by the defeat. Those two great institutions of post-war Britain, the nationalised coal industry and the NUM, no longer dominate our economic and political landscape, largely as a consequence of the intensity and length of the dispute. Nonetheless, the assertion of a complex political legacy remains.

After the strike, the writer Beatrix Campbell posed this perceptive question:

In decades to come, when we come to write and reflect upon the history of this strike as a watershed in working class politics, the real test of change to come will be whether this women's movement is allowed to survive – for the women themselves.

Another essential link with the past can be seen in young people like Carwyn Donovan, one of the small number of South Wales mining apprentices. Carwyn's parents, Carole and David, represented the finest traditions of solidarity between the coalfield and the wider world during 1984-85. And his own commitment to his industry, his community and to his union, are vital clues to our understanding of our past, and our future.

Reflecting on the past thirty years, the experience of defeat has meant a seeking of new explanations, and some new perspectives. The valleys are, after all, still with us – just – and we are certainly part of a much more democratic Wales, which they helped to achieve. The reality of economic and social loss after 1984-85 has in recent years been deepened by the current austerity cuts to benefits and local public services. Nevertheless changing gender relationships, greater sexual tolerance and the enduring sense of community remain the lasting legacies of the year-long struggle.

It is now time for new generations of playwrights, filmmakers *and* historians, working in alliance with political activists within new and old social movements, to test and deconstruct the claim that history is on our side.

Polly Vittorini, Nicola Field and Caron Methol wrote prophetically in 1986:

Tremendous links were forged during the strike, and we must never forget them. They can be the basis for struggles in the future.

That is indeed why, on 14 March 2015 at Onllwyn Miners' Welfare Hall, on the thirtieth anniversary of the strike, the re-established Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valleys Miners' Support Group remembered and honoured Mark Ashton and his re-established Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners Group.

It is for historians, now and in the future, to tell the real story. The task has begun.