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The miners' strike 1984-85

Miners' strike 30 years on: 'I fought not just for "my pit" but for the community'

Caroline Bannock and Guardian readers
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It may be 30 years on but for those involved in the miners' strike, memories are still raw. The anger at the hardship suffered by strikers and their families still runs deep, as does the bitterness between those on the picket lines and those who crossed them. Divided communities take a long time to heal; some never do. Despite the hard times there were many stories that spoke of fortitude of individuals and generosity of strangers. There was even mention of camaraderie between police and mineworkers on the more peaceful picket lines. Others like Orgreave were much more violent.

At the start of the miners' strike in 1984, Bruce Wilson was 29 years old, married with a mortgage and two young kids. He had worked underground as a miner at Silverwood Colliery, Rotherham, South Yorkshire since 1978. "In the early 1980's I/we knew it was coming, we were warned enough by our NUM [National Union of Mineworkers] leadership and other sources. Thatcher and her government wanted a showdown. Where I live there were a dozen collieries within a 20 mile radius ... I fought not just for "my pit" but for the mining community next door."



Silverwood Colliery, Rotherham. South Yorkshire during the miners' strike, August 1984. "Macgregor [chairman of the national coal board] said Yorkshire would be the first to "crack" in the back to work campaign. We didn't, 86% of Yorkshire miners' stayed out until the end" Photograph: Bruce Wilson/GuardianWitness

During the summer of 1984, Wilson along with four others were flying pickets, travelling from their home in Yorkshire to support striking mineworkers in Nottinghamshire. Wilson also picketed at Orgreave coking plant and was there on 18 June, the day of some of the worst violence between mineworkers and police. He kept a diary at the time, “I was running with dozens of riot police in hot pursuit, I ran past an elderly miner, on his knees, out of breath, I stopped, he must have been in his late 50s, he had an old long gaberdine coat on, and it was hot today, he couldn’t get his breath, the riot police were closing in but I couldn’t leave him there ... to this day I don’t know how he managed to get up and run but he did. I ran alongside till we got out of the way and to safety.”

(...)

“This was a sensitive time, (...) 8 000 miners marched from Pontefract Racecourse to join up with the cortege at Pontefract Crematorium. The service was relayed outside and also through the media.” The Guardian’s report at the time included some of Canon Hicks’s address, “the presence of so many miners from all over the country bore moving witness to the deep bond of brotherhood and the mutual respect between those who followed a dangerous and demanding profession.”



Silverwood striking miners wives and families march to the picket line in the miners’ strike Photograph: Bruce Wilson/GuardianWitness

(...)

“The miners were good blokes, Scabs [those who crossed the picket lines] were too and so were we ... this was a Working Class War. Miners and police often came from the same families. I have generations of coal miners in mine ... In the end we all lost. Whilst the police did not do so quite as obviously as the miners, with whole communities devastated and a way of life gone for ever. Unions, in reality the only power balance against a right wing government, were legislatively castrated with more evisceration on the way, to the detriment of us all.”

Crossing the picket lines was a terrifying experience. [Phased](#) describes the first time he tried: “I’m 17 and an apprentice at a Notts colliery and I can’t get into work because a large group of striking miners are blocking the entrance gate. They will stop me by any means that they can and the relatively small group of police officers are unlikely to be able to protect me. I should add at this point that I’ve not yet had a chance to vote on whether or not I support the strike. That will happen the day after next but only after some very bad things have happened later today. My friend tries and succeeds in getting through the pickets but is punched and spat at. I go home instead. The coming weeks would be surreal as police officers from all over the country descend and at times feel like an occupying army.”



11-year-old Mark Watson and his brother marching. Their dad was NUM Branch Secretary at Silverhill Colliery in Nottinghamshire Photograph: Markus Fandango /GuardianWitness

For an 11 year old boy, the strike was exciting. [Mark Watson](#) lived in Stanton Hill in Nottinghamshire, a village built specifically for miners. His dad was NUM Branch Secretary at Silverhill Colliery, “a big Labour Party man and a big union man. He was a local councillor too, always sorting out problems for people, often at the expense of his family life.” Watson remembers “being woken one night in bed by a loud roar, very similar to a football crowd roar. I went to the window and I could make out to the left, in the vicinity of Sutton Colliery a red glow in the sky and the silhouettes of people. I got dressed and climbed out of the bedroom window and went to have a look.”

After this first encounter Watson says he was hooked. “I remember being on a miners’ rally in Durham, marching behind the colliery banner and because Nottinghamshire was the main area that broke the strike there weren’t that many marching behind our NUM banner. But as we marched the crowd seemed to cheer twice as loud, and were throwing money to us.” The animosity between strikers and non-strikers directly affected Watson: “I had quite a bunch of friends around our little area before the strike and I distinctly remember one day going to call for my friend. He answered the door

and said he wasn't coming out, then I heard his Dad shout from the house: "if it's that Watson boy tell him to go away, we don't want him around here". I can't remember it affecting me but I guess it did, from then on there were only a few kids that would be seen in my company, I was spat on a couple of times too."

The support of the wider community helped improve lives for many striking miners and their families. [Rob Ford](#) who was also 11 at the time remembers "the generosity of French Trade Unions, the strange but welcome chocolates from the USSR. Local Labour party members and trade unionists all contributing made it a wonderful time. At the new secondary school a woodwork teacher, Les Jones, told me off and then realised I was talking about my dad being on strike. At the end of the day he appeared with a card with £5 in and a note saying "to Marg and Jim, it is people like you we have to look up - keep the faith and carry on the fight". Needless to say this money went on buying food."

The miners went back to work on 5 March 1985. [Mat Jordan](#) who grew up next to Coventry Colliery in the Warwickshire coalfield reflects, what came after was worse: "the coal board houses being sold out from under people, the mine being privatised then eventually closed, demolished and replaced with ubiquitous Barratt estates and warehouses. Unemployed miners were hidden away on disability allowance. The Blair era initiatives didn't help much either as they encouraged the Barratt housing and business parks. Then the miner's compensation payments were comprehensively bungled."

Though the cost to families and communities was huge, for [Nansy Ferrett](#) it's important to remember the dignity and strength of those who took part: "They were terrible times and I know things can't have been easy, but I look back and feel in awe of my parents, their strength and their love and how they taught us to just enjoy what we have and get through the worst. Sadly my dad, David Lesley Campbell, died aged 59 and not a day goes by when I don't think about how strong and gentle he was, battling always and without complaint, in a life that seemed set against him. My memories of the Miners Strike are not troubled ones, but very rich ones and that is owed, not to a prime minister who demolished industry in her own country, not to a government who did nothing to protect its people, but to two extraordinary ordinary people."