

Women in the miners' strike

Relevant to

Modules on postwar Britain, Margaret Thatcher, and women's history

Background

The miners' strike of 1984-5 pitted the National Coal Board, which was responsible for Britain's nationalized coal mines, against the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which represented workers in the industry. It was a key conflict in the Thatcher period – the Thatcher government wanted to close coal mines and destroy the power of the NUM.

The strike broke out over proposed pit closures, and continued for just 3 days short of an entire year; it led to huge hardship in mining families. Since the 1840s, women had been banned from working underground in Britain's coal mines. The vast majority of those working in the industry were men, and most of the iconic images of the strike involve mainly men – miners and police facing off against one another on picket lines. Women's role in the strike has been much less well-studied.

This film (<https://www.coalfield-women.org/watch-the-video>) was produced as part of a project by Dr Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (UCL), Dr Victoria Dawson (UCL) and Dr Natalie Thomlinson (University of Reading) examining women's experiences and women's activism in the strike. All the women participating in the video also did interviews of 2-3 hours, discussing their lives and their experiences in the strike.

Questions

- What forms of activism did women undertake during the strike? How was women's activism in this strike different from the things women had done in previous miners' strikes in Britain?
- How did women support the strike in the home and family? When we think about political causes we often think about activities like raising money or going on marches – but how are emotions important in political struggles?
- How did activism change the women who got involved in it?
- Why do you think some men in the NUM opposed women getting involved in activism in the strike?
- What are the possible drawbacks of using oral history as a source to find out about the past?

Further resources

You can listen to more clips from the project interviews on the online exhibition:

<https://www.coalfield-women.org>

Read the essay that accompanies the exhibition: <https://www.coalfield-women.org/read-the-exhibition-essay>

Read an article from the *Guardian* in 2014 about women in the miners' strike:

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/apr/07/women-miners-strike-1984-wives-picket-lines>

Read more about how to do oral history on the Oral History Society website:

<https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/>