In March 1984 over 150,000 British coal miners went on strike to protest against plans for widespread closures in the industry. The strike, ultimately unsuccessful, lasted a year and was one of the most significant industrial disputes in British history. Alongside the industrial struggle emerged a large and diverse social movement to help sustain the miners and their communities.

To mark the 30th anniversary of the miners’ strike, the following exhibition has been compiled predominantly from material in the TUC Library Collections at London Metropolitan University. The library has been deposited at the University since 1996 and is a unique resource for the study of the labour movement and working life past, present and future.
In 1972 and 1974 there were national miners’ strikes for the first time since 1926. The strikes, primarily over wages, were successful and partly responsible for the end of Edward Heath’s Conservative government in 1974. They also brought Arthur Scargill to national prominence. Some feel that the Conservatives provoked the miners’ strike of 1984-5 out of a desire for revenge for these defeats.

Former Cabinet member of the Heath government, Margaret Thatcher, was elected in 1979 and again in 1983. In preparation for government, Conservative Nicholas Ridley prepared a report on the publicly owned industries, which suggested ways in which a showdown with unions – including the miners – could be won.
Industrial context

In the early 1980s unemployment rose dramatically, with official figures over 3 million (nearly 12%). The steel workers, traditional allies of the miners, were amongst those hit badly despite a 13 week strike in 1980. Unemployment in coalfield areas could be much higher than average: in South Wales, for example, it was nearly 25 per cent. The Thatcher government introduced a range of legislation aimed at decreasing the power of the trade union movement. Trade unions were banned at GCHQ.
The cause of the strike

The National Union of Mineworkers had already been on an overtime ban for several months. In Scotland in particular there were already several local disputes. But in March 1984, the announcement of the intended closure of Cortonwood, Yorkshire sparked a walkout in Yorkshire that spread across the country. The strike was over pit closures and Arthur Scargill’s claim that there was a ‘hit list’ of pits to close. Much argument revolved around the notion of ‘uneconomic pits’ and on what basis closures should be accepted.
**Division in the coalfields**

While the strike was strong in most areas, some – most importantly Nottinghamshire (which was the second largest NUM area in 1984-5) – had a majority who refused to strike. Often the reason given was the lack of a national ballot. For strikers in these areas, the year was particularly tough. Support groups often gave particular support to the Notts coalfield for this reason.
The classic notion of the ‘pit village’ was already slightly dated by 1984. However, the idea of community became central to the strike: ‘Close a Pit, Kill a Community’ was a slogan used in South Wales. The idea of ‘community’ allowed the strike to take on a broader significance, and encouraged alliances with a wide range of groups beyond trade unions.
'Violence' often dominated media coverage of the strike and pickets were frequently blamed. For many miners and supporters, however, it was the violence of the police that stood out. The police also occupied pit villages in large numbers, restricted freedom of movement, and highly punitive bail conditions were used against pickets. A number of miners were jailed during the dispute. The Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign is seeking the truth about the most notorious example of police violence (and media misrepresentation) at the Orgreave coking plant, Yorkshire, in June 1984.
Welfare cuts

Changes had been made to benefit entitlements to reduce what was being paid to the families of miners on strike. Deductions were made on assumed strike pay which was not being paid by the NUM. Single miners received nothing. Protests were held outside the DHSS headquarters in South London against this policy of trying to starve the miners back to work.
Some women worked in ancillary positions for the coal board and were on strike, however the vast majority of strikers were men. The strike was notable however for essential and highly visible support work of women in the mining areas: running communal kitchens, joining picket lines, speaking across the country and internationally. After the strike, however, Women Against Pit Closures were refused associate membership by the NUM.
Elsewhere in the country, the prominence of the coalfield women in particular during the strike inspired much support from women's organisations. Links were made with Greenham Common, women's trade union organisations and a range of feminist groups.
Trade union solidarity

Trade unionists throughout the country raised food and money for striking miners and their families. Some went further – train drivers, seafarers and others attempted to block strike breaking coal, coke and other substitute fuels. Print workers took industrial action against the worst media coverage. Elsewhere, however, there was tension between unions, particularly with the ISTC (steelworkers union) and EEPTU (electrical workers), whose leader Eric Hammond refused to support TUC guidelines to help miners win the strike.
Trades Councils and miners support groups

Trades councils were often at the heart of the miners support groups that were launched throughout the country. These groups expanded to include a much wider group of people. Their activities included street and door to door collections to raise food and money for the miners; hosting public meetings to allow miners and their families to put their case; joining picket lines and visiting mining areas (if they weren’t already based in one) to give support.
As well as raising funds, members of a number of unions (ASLEF, TGWU, NUR, NUS) attempted to stop the transport of coal and replacement fuels by rail, sea and road. Jimmy Knapp of the National Union of Railwaymen told the 1984 TUC Congress: ‘If a cow were to cross a field with “NUM picket line” painted on it, we would not pass it.’ Despite some successes, the use of non-union haulage, seafarers and port workers were used to undermine the strike (as planned for in the Ridley Report).

Leaflet produced by the NUM, thanking transport workers for their support, c.1984 © National Union of Mineworkers

Locomotive Journal, produced by train drivers’ union Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), February 1985 © ASLEF
Print workers

Print workers, particularly those on Fleet Street, were exceptionally active in supporting the miners, including raising over £1.5 million for the miners. Along with the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) the print unions and National Union of Journalists tried to enforce a ‘right to reply’ for the NUM in the mainstream press. In one notable action, printers refused to print the front page of one issue of The Sun which compared Arthur Scargill to Hitler. Print workers would suffer the next major defeat for the trade union movement in the 1986 Wapping dispute, with Rupert Murdoch aided by the police and Eric Hammond.
Cultures of solidarity

Support for the miners often evoked historical relationships sometimes going back to 1926. More often it was pointed out the miners had offered support to NHS workers, Grunwick strikers, steel worker and others in the past. During the strike, miners continued to support other workers – joining picket lines at Barking Hospital for instance.
There was some debate over the role of the Labour Party leadership in the strike – some felt Neil Kinnock, the son of a South Wales coal miner, saw the strike as an embarrassment and damaging to Labour’s electoral prospects. But many grass roots members of the party were very active in supporting the NUM which was affiliated to the Labour Party.
Local authorities

Many Labour local authorities felt under attack by the government over rate-capping and the abolition of metropolitan authorities. Labour-led councils in coalfield areas often provided practical support for the miners during the year – for instance deferring council housing rents and providing free school meals.

One popular, if somewhat controversial, means of support was for a group to ‘twin’ with a particular pit or area. Some within the NUM and official union bodies argued that this created an uneven distribution of funds. However, it was a popular practice: a Labour Research Department survey of 300 support groups found nearly half had twinning arrangements.

Advert appearing in the ‘Concert for Heroes’ programme at the Royal Albert Hall, 2nd March 1986, documents Greenwich Council’s twinning with Easington in County Durham © Royal Borough of Greenwich

Islington Council extends fraternal greetings to the National Justice for Mineworkers Campaign

Islington Council extends fraternal greetings to the National Justice for Mineworkers Campaign and the TUC Congress.

Message of support from Islington Council, appearing in the programme of the ‘Concert for Heroes’ at the Royal Albert Hall, 2nd March 1986 © London Borough of Islington
Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) was formed in London in June 1984. Eleven other lesbian and gay support groups were formed across Britain and Ireland. The reciprocal support given by the NUM was important in passing lesbian and gay equality motions for the first time at TUC and Labour conferences in 1985.
Black support for the miners

Black miners were amongst those raising money at the Notting Hill carnival in 1984, making the connection between police oppression of black people and the miners. Throughout the country, black organisations supported the miners: for example the Asian Youth Movement in Sheffield joined picket lines. Black Delegation to the Miners was a group of black Londoners, many based in Southall, which raised funds and food and visited the Kent coalfield to show solidarity.
Student solidarity

Students were amongst those who came out in support of miners. Notable for support were students at the polytechnics. The Polytechnic of North London (PNL), now London Metropolitan University, was one of the most radical. Already in legal trouble for opposing the presence of National Front organiser Patrick Harrington at PNL, student union funds faced being seized for donating to the miners.

Leaflet produced by the Polytechnic of North London Students’ Union, to promote a rally in support of the SU Executive during their trial at the High Court, May 1985. The Students’ Union were on trial for making a cash donation to a miners’ welfare fund. © London Metropolitan University
International support for the strike

Money was raised throughout the world for the miners, often through trade union or socialist connections. An international march of people from various countries was held from London to Kent to show solidarity. Miners showed a sense of international solidarity when Kent NUM members dumped coal on the doorstep of South Africa house in protest at apartheid. International solidarity was strained by coal imports however, in particular those from ‘socialist’ Poland.
Between Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge, the miners’ strike provided a focus for politically minded artists, including members of the trade union Equity. One mass picket at Taylors Lane Power Station (Brent) was supported by a cultural collective called ‘Pit Dragon’. The NME commented: ‘Scab lorries turned back by a variety show? Surely a first in the annals of industrial struggle.’
A special fundraising effort was made to give miners and their families a decent Christmas, to provide turkeys and toys for the children. Some support groups and trade unions paid for and attended Christmas parties in the coalfields.
Aftermath of the strike

In March 1985 the NUM ended the strike with no agreement. Ian MacGregor, head of the National Coal Board, said in the aftermath of the strike: ‘People are now discovering the price of insubordination and insurrection. And boy, are we going to make it stick’. A rival union, the Union of Democratic Miners was established. Victimisation increased, and many of the hundreds of NUM members sacked during the year (even those who were not convicted of any offence) were refused their jobs back. The National Justice for Mineworkers Campaign still campaigns for those who were victimised during the dispute.
The coal industry since the strike

Forty pits out of 170 were closed just in 1985–86. A new major round of pit closures was announced in 1992, and despite significant public support for the NUM and large national demonstrations, these were carried through. The industry was then privatised and has continued to decline. With the recent closure of Thoresby (Nottinghamshire) and Hatfield (Yorkshire), Yorkshire’s Kellingley Colliery is the last deep coal mine in Britain, and it is expected to close late in 2015. Opencast coal mining continues in Britain, as does the importing of coal.
Legacy of the strike

The defeat of the miners’ strike and the subsequent destruction of the deep coal mining industry in Britain played a significant role in weakening trade union power. The result was an increasingly unequal country. The proud memory of resisting this attack, however, is kept alive in the former coalfields and elsewhere, commemorating and celebrating the spirit of solidarity.

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Trades Union Congress Library Collections
London Metropolitan University
236-250 Holloway Road
London N7 6PP
Tel: 020 7133 3726
Email: tuclib@londonmet.ac.uk
Website: www.londonmet.ac.uk/tuc