

spare Rib

a women's liberation magazine
issue 147
October 1984
USA \$1.50
70p

Asbestos in our own homes.
Who's afraid of Germaine Greer?
Women caught between food & war.
Carnival!

Women winning the strike



WE'LL BE HERE RIGHT TO THE END

The 1984 miners strike will go down in history as a crucial and bitter dispute. It is already into its eighth month and the government and coal board have remained steadily intransigent. But it will also be recorded as a turning point in the lives of hundreds of working class women who have surfaced amid this strife and have shown a capacity for organising that has offended the pride of many a miner. Here *Loretta Loach* from *Spare Rib* meets with two such women.

AND AFTER

Bobby and Sue come from a small pit village called Bentley in South Yorkshire. They are sisters and their family have been part of the mining community for over 100 years. The decisions that affect their lives and those of other working class communities are remote from them. 'It happens down in London' said Sue, the youngest of the two. 'It were nothing to do with us. We imagined that that people in London thought we were still in clogs and flat caps. We're northerners, you're southerners. When you had snow down in London we'd say 'well they've got everything else, they may as well have that as well.' Before, we didn't used to care two sods what Margaret Thatcher were doin' with oil or price of oil, now we do because it affects us.' 'Put it this way' says Bobby carefully 'you read more and you're more wary of what you read. At one time I didn't care about coal, I were a wife, those things didn't concern me, but now we're taking some of those

things on.'

Until the moves to safeguard their livelihoods, Bobby and Sue have never been involved in anything even distantly political. Their action, like those of other women in the coalfields, grew out of the practical needs of the community, but through their energy and initiative they and the other women who make up Bentley Women's Action Group have created a profound and unprecedented change in the essentially male culture of the mining community. 'Now when we're in pub we sit with the men and join in instead of chatting about kids and the home and things. We can sit with 'em and talk about pit. We want to know about things, about what's happening in the union.' 'Some mornings I've been picketing before him and I've come home and he's done the housework.' 'I've always thought well, men do thinking. But I speak my mind now more than I've ever done. I've always been outspoken but I've never pushed myself.'

The women are now central in the community, they have extended their influence to every area of village life, even the sacred male institution of Sunday cricket has been brought within their remit. 'By weekend we've no money left out of Social and we don't do meals in kitchen, that's the time when you can get depressed. So we've organised games on Sunday. Women play men at cricket and rounders.' How have the men responded to that? 'You know, you'd think we were playing test cricket at Lords. They take it so seriously, you know, "we'll show them women". One day' Sue said imitating them 'they said "if there's any cheating we're not playing anymore." They even make us mark it officially on sheet — Bentley Women's Action Group versus Bentley pickets. They made us wear bloody pads and they couldn't stand it if a woman hit a good one.'

How did it all start?

'We went on a rally for Women Against Pit Closures and said if anyone is interested in setting up a kitchen let's get in contact with one another. Our first meeting were about five weeks into strike. We thought kitchens were a good idea because we women could then play a part and keep everybody together. We'd be able to feed everybody so we could keep fighting against pit closures, but we didn't expect it to last as long as this. At first you only got men in for food, women never came, they thought it were only for men, now they come, and kids. Everybody sits in with everybody,

women don't just sit together. We talk about everything: picketing, what's been happening — they should have strike headquarters down at kitchen because everybody's there.'

When I arrived at Bentley pavilion just before lunchtime the kitchen was just preparing to dish up. There were about five women and two men in there, one being a retired chef who offers his services freely in support of the strike. Do men help? 'They do come in and wash up for us' said Bobby. 'If we're busy they'll muck in. They'll do shopping and sweep floor. Before if they'd been asked to do those things they'd have said "who she bloody talking to", now they do it — don't get me wrong, you can't change 'em in 22 weeks but they do it.'

But getting men to help seems to them undignified and compromising. When the group was first set up, the union offered them £50. The women chose to regard it as a loan saying 'we want to be self-supporting we don't want nout to do with NUM. We wanted our own control. Can you imagine having men, they'd say "I think you can do it like this or you can just have this," we didn't want none of that. We wanted to have money, we wanted to have control of the place. At first we said let them go picketing, we'll feed 'em all, we don't need them we'll do it ourselves. We've made every decision as far as running the thing is concerned.' Whilst wishing to be independent of men they did not rest content with the arduous labour of 'women's work' in the kitchen. They wanted more involvement in the dispute, they wanted to go picketing and initially they were met with stubborn resistance. 'When they wouldn't let us go picketing we all got together and played hell with the union. The treasurer of the union locally wasn't keen at first and he said we weren't on books anymore' (that means you are not covered by the NUM if you are arrested) 'but that were just a threat.' Bobby laughs. 'They hate to think that women's getting top dog of 'em.'

Bobby is the sort of woman who believes things can only be achieved if you contribute every bit of yourself to the fight. It's not a position, that's just the way she is, pushed strongly and powerfully by the emotional waves of the strike. The first time she went picketing was a mass picket at Harworth colliery. 'I was petrified. I'd never seen so many police, you just don't in a little village like this. It were a weird feelin'. Then, you only have to see one scab and police talking into their machines and down the line goes the whisper, 'They're coming' and you just erupt. There was no stoppin' me, I broke through and got over the other side of the road because it was near scabs. At first they wouldn't let me through, it was too dangerous, but I said I'd catch a bus round there if they didn't. First time on a picket line and I turned two blokes back. I've told 'im' she said, nodding in the direction of her husband, 'If you'd have let women go picketing in the beginning you'd have got through to them long ago.'

'Have you ever seen a woman on a picket line when you watch TV?' asked Sue, who now takes it in turns with her husband to go picketing, so one of them can look after their two young children. 'It never shows women on a picket line, the camera seems to stop dead at women. If the Notts women saw Yorkshire

women on a picket line they'd think differently about the strike. When Anne Scargill got arrested the cameras went mad. Don't get me wrong, I think she does a wonderful job, but there's plenty of ordinary women doing the same but the tele ignores them.'

Standing up to the men

Through their activity, the women have experienced the more general oppression they feel in relation to men though they would not refer to it as such. 'We've stood up for ourselves. We've stood up to them. Like, we say we're going to London. At first it were "can we go to London," we used to think that we should give a few days notice; break it to them gently and get housework and washing done. Now sometimes you get a phone call two hours before you've got to go and we just drop everything and it's "I'm off to London." 'The action group is a place where, apart from business, the women exchange stories about the men's reaction to what we are doing. The example they give to each other provides the momentum and opportunity to overcome some of the traditional passivity and timidity in the home. One woman bargained with her husband to be allowed to go to London for a rally. She exchanged sex for his permission. When she mentioned



Bobby talks about the Strike

this to some of the women in the group she said 'I thought, what the hell am I giving in to him for,' recognising what she was doing in order to keep him quiet. In the beginning they were asking. Now they are just doing. 'If it's an issue we're fighting on' said Sue 'If the husbands say no the women come back and tell us and we'll get on to them and say "what do you bloody mean no". There'll be no comeback because he knows it would come straight back to the group. When we first met in a pub it were 'Oh he'll not let me go to pub and we'd say, ask him, and if he said no we'd be on to him.'

The Bentley Women's Action Group and no doubt others like them, has rivalled the union as the key organising vehicle in the community. The implications of this for women hardly needs emphasising. Out of the material need to provide food and their energy has been released and they have drawn strength from the powerful role they now play in things. Through their impulse, challenges are being made to myths and assumptions cherished for centuries in the mining community. Mr Scargill may walk on water but he does so because unknown to him, the imagination and initiative of women is providing the scope and thrust of this rebellion. 'Margaret Thatcher didn't bargain for us. Can you imagine what would happen to strike if Kitchen fell through — they're depending on us.'

'I think women wanted a say before about coal issue, about strike. But nobody has ever let them, nobody has ever, ever wanted to listen. The NUM being all men; they wouldn't listen, no-one is ever allowed near when there's a meeting, even kids aren't allowed near. Keith took Neil, he's only ten, when I were in London. They turned him out. They wouldn't speak in front of a non NUM member and everyone looked round wondering who they were referring to.' 'You see' said Bobby 'we're trying to change all this not

just in Bentley.' The women believe they should be allowed in union meetings when they are discussing business which concerns them. 'This strike has been on for 24 weeks and we've done everything the men have, we've done more, we've done kitchens, speaking, rallying, picketing, the only thing we haven't done is go down pit and we intend to do that when the strike is over.'

Men's jealousy

Are some of the men jealous of the trips to London, the meetings, the sheer excitement of being active? Bobby's husband has been in the NUM for 22 years and he said to her 'you've done more mouthing in 22 weeks than I've done ever, the whole time I've been in the union.' Sue said, 'They'd never in their wildest dreams have imagined that we would be where we are today. They thought we'd be saying "we've got to have help." They make remarks, like when we got union mini bus to go to Nottingham they said "bloody marvellous they can get mini bus when they want." And if we had committee meeting in pub we'd stay for a drink after, that niggled them at first. When we got to kitchens the day after we'd have conflag, 'out said last night when you got home? were it alright? Aye, nout mentioned.' A lot of the men have gone for women's action groups but we're not scared, we've got gobs, we'll use 'em.'

Unsurprisingly, hesitation and lack of confidence characterised the early days of women's involvement in the strike and this was felt as much in relation to 'educated' women in London as it was to men. 'When I first went to London' said Bobby 'I expected to be laughed at, the way I spoke, the way I am, but I made some friends and that gives you more guts to do what you're doing. It's not really me, speaking in public, I get nervous but I think well, we are somebody and we've got to do it. If more women could see and hear women such as me

who's not had a right good education they'd see they could do it and we'd get on much better.' Sue, the more business like one of the two, normally speaks at union meetings. 'I make notes beforehand. I don't go into great detail. I say what I've got to say and that's it.' She mentions proudly her sister's capacity to rouse an audience. 'She makes 'em cry. I mean, she jumps around from one thing to another but it's all her, from her heart, it's truth.'

When they visited women's groups in London the Greek Cypriot women met them with a table of food, £50 donation and the warmth and understanding of another community who had faced strife. Maria, one of the workers, said 'Our



Women Against Pit Closures — Keeping the Strike from sinking

community are very sensitive to issues like these, they have a long history of struggle, and they relate to it straight away.' Bobby thanked them, shook all their hands and embraced them, their kindness had moved her to tears.

Through the experience of the Bentley women the language of politics has woven its way, giving shape and meaning to the wealth of things they are en-

Continued on page 26

Continued from pg 8...

countering. 'Do terms like sexism have any meaning for you?' They paused. 'Oh you mean men slaggin' off women? Yes, they'd shout things at women on picket lines and we'd go up and say "we're not here for stuff like that." It makes 'em think.' Sue believes that one of the reasons women have had the confidence to speak out is because of Greenham Common. 'It was only women that made peace camps, it was the women that made a stand for peace. I know men agree with it but it took women to get up off their arses and do something before things moved.' Bobby mentioned a rally where 'even the men' gave a standing ovation to a woman from Greenham. 'They're brilliant those women!'

'The line up here was that they were scruffy lesbians and there were lesbians in one camp and junkies in another. I know they do that, I know they do have lesbians there, but they're fighting for a cause. I could see that and people shouldn't slag 'em off for what they do.'

I'm not a feminist but ...

'I'm not a feminist' said Sue 'I don't know though, I've got feminist views on some things, I read your magazine, I agree with some of it but I'm not what you are, you're too feminist you are, but when they appeal to you' she gives an example 'like when police called you (Bobby) a fucking lesbian on the picket lines you were saying "I was scared, did he think I was?"' Bobby joins in, 'when we talked about it with these feminists they said, "why be scared, there's nout to be ashamed of" and they put their point to us and it were logical, so I said to young Anne, "your place or mine!"' Sue interrupted, 'But that's makin' a mockery of lesbians!' 'We weren't though' replied Bobby.

'When Maggie Thatcher came

to power a lot of it were to do with women. I think we thought, great, woman rulin' country, it'll be money in pockets and for women high up in the country with good jobs, educated women, it was. She said we could buy our council houses but she conned us, she wanted us to have a mortgage so we would be frightened. You know, "give 'em everything they want and they'll not come out on strike". Before we'd have never talked politics or religion now I'd have my say on both.'

The women have sustained their organising effort for over six months. When they speak of the group they refer to the friendship and bond that has grown between them. 'We really want to stick together and we've said that after the strike we can't let it go, and when we meet we always say don't forget it's our fight and we'll be here right to the end and after it. We no longer stand behind men, we stand with them.' It has given them all confidence. 'Linda who lives up the road, we took her to London and she hardly opened her mouth. She does now. If she hears anyone pullin' us down she'll stand up to 'em. Her mom has said, "God, this has really brought you out of your shell." We'd have all cracked up if we'd not had the group.' Such a long dispute like this places an immense strain on the women and their relationships. Managing on social security, worrying about feeding and clothing a family, arrears on HP payments can all prove too much. 'One woman in the group split up from her husband, she'd got three little kids and it got her down, she's gone home to her mam.' For the most part, the existence of the group lessens the feelings of anxiety and isolation that all of the women feel. By sharing day to day problems some of the pressure is relieved. Have things changed in the home at all? 'Yes, Kit' (Bobby's husband) 'has to do

more. This morning I thought, I can't shop I'm too tired, and before I knew it he'd looked to see what was needed and gone. Any other time it would have been me saying, "go for a loaf duck." 'It's the same if we go to one of our houses for meetings, none of us make tea we say to 'em put kettle on love.' Do you think that after the strike the changes that have taken place will go back? 'I don't think any of us will allow that, it will be job share. The women have had a good thing, they'll not go back to it especially the young lasses.'

But this is not a normal time for the people of Bentley. It is an exceptional period of industrial and social militancy. If the women have the confidence and energy to continue organising after the strike, their bargaining power in relation to men will no doubt diminish. Being politically involved in matters relating to the men is one thing but when it comes to issues independent of them will they be so tolerant?

Nevertheless things in the coalfields of Britain will never be as they were prior to the strike. The working class women in these communities have, through intense personal struggle realised some of their strength and potential. 'We can't lose this close bond. Instead of asking a bloke we have asked each other. It's brilliant. We've fought for this. After, we might join the Labour Party and form a women's section. I've told yer we'll be here right to the end and after.'

Donations and Messages of support to: *Bentley Women's Action Group, 53 Briar Road, Armthorpe, Doncaster.*
National Women Against Pit Closures Group,
c/o NUM St James House,
Vicar Lane, Sheffield.

Thanks to Sue, Bobby and their husbands Kit and Keith for their friendliness and hospitality and to all the men and women of Bentley colliery.