

Liz French on the 40th Anniversary of the British Miners' Strike: "We were betrayed by the TUC and Labour Party."

Our correspondent
26 March 2024

The WSWs spoke with Liz French from Betteshanger, a former pit village in the Kent coalfield in south-east England. Liz was a founding member of the National Women Against Pit Closures. Formed in May 1984, it organised soup kitchens and food parcels for the striking miners and their families and campaigned for support in the working class in Britain and around the world.

Among the 200 miners imprisoned during the 1984-85 strike, Liz's late husband Terry received one of the longest prison sentences of five years. She was involved in setting up the Justice for Miners Campaign in January 1985 to overturn the trumped-up convictions and fight for the reinstatement of the 966 miners who were sacked. She is active in the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, demanding a public inquiry into the brutal police assault on picketing miners at the coking depot on the outskirts of Sheffield on June 18, 1984.

Liz: I have been involved with all the landmark anniversaries of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike—the 10th, 20th, 30th. Recently I was up in Durham in northeast England and in South Yorkshire in Hatfield to mark the 40th. I spoke in Brighton at the university.

It is vital for the younger generation to know about the fight we waged, they have it even worse than us with zero hours contracts and no rights at work. They need to know the history so they can do a better job. Thatcher picked on us to take on the working class and destroy the rights of everyone.

The Kent coalfield was very militant in the 84-5 strike. There were three pits, Betteshanger, Snowdon and Tilmanstone. Snowdon was the only pit earmarked for closure in Kent as part of the 20 targeted nationally

by the National Coal Board. But Kent all came out together, not like in Nottinghamshire. At the start of the strike we only needed token pickets at our pits as it was solid.

Coalmining in Kent developed and expanded in the 1920's. Many of those who came to work in the pits were militants who had been sacked following the 1926 General Strike. They came from all over including Scotland, Yorkshire, Wales and Ireland. My parents were Scottish, and my father worked down the pit. During World War II there were strikes in Kent over the atrocious working conditions underground and miners were imprisoned and accused of treason just for standing up for their rights.

I was brought up in a political household and I had been a union convenor. For a more detailed history I would recommend a book *Betteshanger Colliery—They didn't take it off the wind* by Terry Harrison (a retired miner and veteran of the 84-85 strike).

As the strike in Kent was solid many of our miners went out flying picketing but the police stopped them at the Dartford tunnel (south-east of London) travelling north to Nottinghamshire and other areas. This is one of the reasons why the Kent miners, including my husband Terry, marched to Nottinghamshire in April—just to be able to reach the pits. They were met by other striking miners. There was a brilliant rally in Nottingham at the end.

At Betteshanger colliery in the summer of the strike some of the men went down the pit to inspect for damage. There had been rumours of a danger of flooding and they wanted to ensure there was a pit to go back to after the strike, as this was what it was all about defending jobs and communities. This was described as

an “occupation” and when they got back to the pit gates there were 500 Metropolitan Police waiting for them.

The company sacked around 30 National Union of Mineworkers members, not just those who had been involved with the inspection. Following the return to work after the strike they had no union representatives. All the six jailed miners in Kent during the strike came from Betteshanger.

Terry was accused of attacking a police officer during the picketing of Wivenhoe Port in Essex in May against the importation of scab coal. These were trumped charges. He was brought before Chelmsford Magistrates in the Christmas of 1984. This produced a hung jury. Terry had been represented by Mike Mansfield (a prominent civil rights lawyer). But two weeks later in January he was represented by a different lawyer and there were now statements from 13 police officers claiming Terry had shouted, “I’ve done one! I don’t mind doing them all!” And was given five years imprisonment.

This was all very politicised. The Conservative Home Secretary Leon Brittan had stated in relation to Orgreave that those charged with riot should receive the maximum penalty, which carried a life sentence. Look at what happened there, with the police falsifying statements. I saw how the miners at Orgreave had been battered by the police, I put up a miner from Staffordshire who was at Orgreave for two weeks afterwards. He was a wreck and felt it was safer for him in Kent.

(The trials of 55 miners for riot and 40 for unlawful assembly at Orgreave were not held until May, 1985 and collapsed after police evidence was deemed “unreliable.” Later in 1991, South Yorkshire Police paid £425,000 compensation to 39 miners for assault, wrongful arrest, unlawful detention and malicious prosecution while still denying any fault).

The imprisonment of miners was about making examples of workers taking on the establishment. We continue to fight for justice and hope we can achieve the same as families of victims at Hillsborough (97 Liverpool supporters crushed to death at a FA Cup semi-final on April 15 1989, resulting from the brutal policing of the football match. After an extensive official cover-up and filthy media campaign against the victims, in 2012 the Hillsborough Independent Panel confirmed the deaths were the result of police and

corporate negligence but no one in authority has faced prosecution.)

During the strike I travelled around the world raising money—Ireland, France, Belgium, Holland and America, twice. I don’t think there was a day I spent in the house. The generosity from workers was incredible. People came over to visit Terry in prison from the US and Australia. But it was always the rank-and-file who supported us, not the bosses of the Labour Party and the TUC (Trades Union Congress). We had support from printworkers, dockers and rail workers. There should have been a General Strike.

Within about five years all the Kent pits were closed. There has been nothing to replace them, it has been devastating for the communities. Only a few miners found work on the construction of the Channel Tunnel and in my view that was a result of blacklisting. Many became taxi drivers and for the generation which followed you are talking low paid service jobs in cafés and pubs. Many moved away from the area.

We were betrayed by the TUC and Labour Party. Look at Neil Kinnock [Labour leader at the time of the strike] now, he sits in the House of Lords. He could not give a s***. Tony Blair did not remove any of the anti-union laws from the days of Thatcher or provide the miners with any compensation. I don’t trust [Labour leader Sir Keir] Starmer, he is a Tory. He is supporting the war against Gaza. It’s totally wrong.

I support the Palestinians. I received wonderful hospitality from a Palestinian family during the strike and they explained the long history of their struggle, and I wear the scarf with pride and explain to people why.

The Socialist Equality Party has published a new pamphlet marking the 40th anniversary, The Lessons of the 1984-85 miners’ strike. Order your copy here from Mehring Books.



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