

**The Miners Strike
by Owen Kelly**

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The miners' strike of 1984/1985 may well be the most widely documented industrial dispute that Britain has ever experienced. Partly this was due to the length of time that the strike lasted. There was simply more time than is usually the case to write stories, take photographs and conduct interviews. Mostly, however, it was due to the nature of the political issues that lay behind the dispute. The Thatcher government saw the defeat of the miners as imperative, to the extent that they were prepared to commit more public money to breaking the strike than they were to developing the coal industry. That small coalition of private entrepreneurs and public custodians who control and manage the media saw their interests as aligning with those of the government, and thus newspapers and television screens were filled with images and reports which appeared to vindicate the National Coal Board's, and the government's, position.

The photographs which filled the front pages of the popular press for much of the dispute were images which purported to show men (and sometimes women) engaged in a frightening collective madness of a kind which all right-thinking readers would surely condemn. There were images which seemed to show violent pickets forcing a reluctant police force to respond, images of strikers apparently terrorising innocent people merely trying to exercise their right to work, image of property allegedly damaged by miners. Where these images were ambiguous, where the police for example seemed to be retaliating before they were attacked, we were provided with an official reading. This took the form of direct editorial comment or commentary in some instances, although more usually it emerged as a set of assumptions underpinning the contexts into which the images were placed. These assumptions, which operated partly through the choices of language used to report the various claims and counterclaims, served to direct the reader or viewer to certain officially preferred readings of the images. Thus, for example, police spokesmen were reported as stating or explaining what events had taken place, while NUM officials were reported as alleging or claiming that something had happened.

The images in the press and on the television news bulletins drew their power from two separate sources. Firstly, they were repeated throughout the dispute in such a way that they became an officially approved 'history' of the strike. This repetition juxtaposed images, soundtracks and commentary to produce a

narrative with its own inter logic, through which the public presentation of the positions of the NUM and the NUB was fixed. The power of photographs to excite responses of emotion and excitement enabled the media to sidestep questions of economics, of public planning and investment, of the need for a rational energy policy, in favour of a narrative which was essential dramatic, with heroes and villains, sensible moderates and wild extremists.

Secondly, these images were presented as though they were without a point of view. The popular belief that 'the camera never lies' was, as always, a crucial weapon in the armoury of those who seek to prose the views of one class, or one controlling group, as 'natural' or as self-evident 'common-sense'. It enabled that small group who control and manage the media to produce 'evidence' for their point of view, and to market that point of view as a natural consensus within which civilised people could make choices. Other equally valid points of view thus became stigmatised as irrational, wild or extremist.

This presentation was reinforced by the quasi-anthropological nature of much of the media coverage of the strike. Not quite all of the coverage was overtly hostile for there were, from time to time, arts and photographs which looked at the effects that the strike was having~ on innig families. These, however, were almost always presented as expeditions by reporter and photographer into unfamiliar territory, in which lurked strange tribal customs left over from days gone by. The miners and their families became stereotyped into categories which all fitted neatly into the narrative web of that semi-official history which, consciously or unconsciously, the media was assembling. The miners' children were portrayed as hungry waifs, their mothers as helpless but struggling to manage, the mining villages as torn asunder: all seen as victims of something which they could not control and could scarcely understand. We were invited to see them as simple folk, dupe and misled by the coldhearted leftists at the top. The photographic images employed in these background stories underlined this in their use of ironic regional imagery and their adoption of the kinds of styles usually associated with the photography of war casualties and victims: people caught looking passive and bewildered, people taken in isolation or dwarfed by a large piece of mining machinery, interacting with nothing or nobody.

Yet this is not the way that the people who participated in the strike experienced it. Nor is it the only way in which the strike was recorded. There exists, outside of and apart from the narrow range of photographs available in the press and on television, a substantial body of work undertaken during the course of the dispute by committed photographers and community artists. Their work differs from the photographs presented through the centralised national media both in its intentions and in its effects. I want to look at just two example of this work, both of which point towards the real social and politic~ possibilities of a

committed photographic practice which incorporates the idea of a democratic control over the photographic images into the methods of production.

Jubilee Community Arts are based in West Bromwich in the Midlands, where they act as a seven person multi-media community arts team. Their work includes photography, as well as drama and music. Their involvement with the striking miners came about through their links with Banner Theatre another Midlands-based group with a long established pattern of work with trades unions. Initially Banner and Jubilee worked together on an audio tape in support of the strike, and subsequently Banner asked Jubilee if they would assist them with some morale-boosting concerts in the Yorkshire area. Out of this arose a sustained link between Jubilee and the Kellingley branch of the n.u.m, which led the group to spend a week living and working at the Kellingley miners' social centre, the 'Big K' in Knottingley. During the dispute when they arrived their role was unclear. They were not sure if they were supposed simply to keep people's spirits up by organizing entertainments, or whether there was some specific contribution that they could make to advance the miners' struggle. In the event they did both; beginning with organising music workshops and moving onto photographic and banner-making work. Their photographic work was neither inevitable nor predetermined, for they did not arrive as a photographic group, but rather as a group who could, if the occasion demanded it, take photographs. More importantly, they did not see themselves as professional photographers, but as supporters and sympathisers who could take photographs. The success or failure of the project was never going to be measured in terms of how many (if any) photographs they took since they only intended to use their cameras at all if there seemed to be specific reasons why this would be useful.

In practice, their photographic skills did indeed prove useful, and came to form a large part of their work at Kellingley. The photographs that resulted from their work moved away from the war photography style of reporting on which the national press concentrated, and was concerned instead with the daily lives of the pickets, and the men and women involved in supporting the pickets.

These photographs were initially intended to be seen by the people who had been photographed, and by their friends and colleagues. They were intended for a specific known audience. Yet they are not snapshots, and they are not in any way arbitrary in what they portray. The photographs were all taken with the full participation of those being photographed.

Some are self-portraits taken by means of a long cable-release. In others the role of the photographer has been reduced to that of camera operator, acting on the instructions of those being photographed. They are all collaborative works between those on either side of the camera; a collaboration which is both technical and political and which embraces both the means of producing the images and the purpose behind their production. The photographs were taken

in and around the sites of the pickets, or at the social centre at the end of picket duty. The struggle in which those portrayed are engaged, then, forms both the context for each image and the specific visual background for that image. Those in the photographs, however, appear neither passive nor overwhelmed by the context in which they are placed. They look strong and often joyful. Significantly the portraits are all small group photographs, and the groups link arms or stand close together in obvious solidarity and comradeship.

Throughout the portraits there is a kind of serial joke in which one member of the group has her or his hand behind the head of another, with two fingers held up to form rabbits' ears. This repeated motif, more than anything else, demonstrates the way in which these images arose as a part of a collective activity, rather than as a detached record of a collective activity. The joke grew because everybody participated in the photographic process, and because everybody was able to see the previous days' photographs pinned to the wall when they arrived at the centre for picket duty. Jubilee's role was as active participants in the social process of the struggle, and these photographs reflect this. They came as allies, not as photographers, and in doing this they helped create photographs that no neutral photographer would have got.

Jubilee can be seen as an example of the way that community arts groups became involved with the miners, responding to appeals and requests that reached them through the informal networks that they had long established as part of their working process. Peter Kirkham, on the other hand, provides an example of the ways in which committed individual photographers became involved with NUM lodges and support groups.

The work carried out by Peter Kirkham and by Jubilee Community Arts began in different ways and was undertaken in different circumstances.

This project is the work of a collective engaged in what they rightly saw as an important part of their overall work, of specific working process which aims at being open and democratic; so that, for example, to see if these photographs printed without obtaining the explicit permission of the people who appear in them. In this work the photographic work was part of a larger political project. This is an available tool for use in a political engagement, but not the reason for that engagement. Nevertheless the photographic skills which were brought to the projects were considered and their use carefully calculated. The photographs that were produced display both a knowledge of photographic history, and a clarity of purpose which seeks to subvert dominant photographic conventions.

Like much community photography the project laid great stress on the process by which the photographs were produced. The photographic process was a part, albeit in the end a very important part, of a larger collective process, the developments and limitations of which determined the directions that the

photographic processes took. At the social centre in Knottingley members of Jubilee developed their films in the toilets at the end of each day and pinned the prints that resulted on the walls for the - miners and their families to see the next day. It was their reaction to the previous day's work that shaped the agenda (both photographic and social) each morning, and it was this cumulative process that determined the aesthetics of Jubilee's work, as they were drawn into discussions with the miners about the form and content of their work.

Jubilee were not working towards a known goal, for they were there primarily to assist, to offer support and to show solidarity, and they rightly felt that their role should be concerned with doing things with the miners and the support groups, not doing things for them. It was up to those being photographed, as much as those doing the photographing, to determine the purpose of the activity and the ways in which the photographs that were produced would be used.

Their work was therefore exploratory and at the point at which it was begun nobody could predict how it would turn out, or how (if at all) it would prove useful or worthwhile. Moreover, Jubilee declared from the outset that this process of exploration would be a shared one in which the miners, the support groups and their families would be active

Participants, and in this their work contrasted sharply with the work of mainstream media photographers and reporters, even the most sympathetic of whom assumed that it was their job to tell the story and the miners' job to be grateful that they were doing it.

The exploratory nature of the project meant that development of the work was unpredictable, and at times surprising. A number of miners, for example, at Kellingley decided to use a series of photographs that Jubilee had helped produce as the visual basis for a full size banner. This they worked on with another member of Jubilee, and the result is an astonishingly powerful updating of the old crafts union banners, in which the struggle for jobs, and for the lives of the mining villages, is depicted in terms of optimism and Collective strength. The use of photographs taken on or around picket lines as the basis for the carefully painted details prevents the images from sliding into a generalised or romanticised sentimentality. Instead the overall image is constructed from visual depictions of actual incidents, which are a part of the lodge's collective memory. The photographs which we produced became the raw material for a second project, decided upon and acted out collectively as part of the wider struggle.

Although Jubilee regarded it as essential that the process through which photographs were produced was a part of, and an example of, the wider social and political process in which they WE engaged, it was always an understood part of their role that, within these processes, they would be able to provide the means by which the photographs that did result were, conventionally speaking,

professional'. This was to be their specific" contribution, their reason for being there at all. In the processes in which they were engaged it was always understood that the quality of whatever product evolved would be of paramount importance. Once it had been decided to produce a banner everyone involved knew that it would have to be a banner that the lodge could stand behind with pride. There was, therefore, no dichotomy between process and product, such as has traditionally bedevilled community photography.

The real dichotomy which the project faced was between presentation and representation, and this centred around questions of control. The miners were not just involved in an industrial dispute; they had been drawn into a war of imagery and ideology, in which there was a concert effort by the government and media to present them as the enemy within whose demise was as necessary as it was inevitable. This was achieved by the public representation of the miners through images over which they had no control and in the construction of which they had played no active part. This project pointed towards a different strategy that went far beyond any 'right to reply'. They pointed towards the abilities of people to work collaboratively to present group images which they had constructed as a group.

These projects pointed, and still point, to a new socialist demand for cultural democracy; for the right of people to participate in determining the social arrangements and agencies through which they are, in part, determined. This means more than the right to construct images collectively as part of a wider political or social process; means having the ability to make those images public, and to distribute those images. The obstacles in the way of such a democracy are not photographic and nor are they technical; they are, as the miners found out, political. Attempts to reduce this problem to questions about how to anchor an image with text miss the point. As the work *Jubilee* and Peter Kirkham shows, when the process of photographic production is a coherent part of a wider political process, images do not need 'fixing' for they operate in a fluid and dynamic way. What is needed is the development of federated networks through which the presentations can be distributed and shared, and common meanings developed, and the development of a socialist consciousness which will recognise these cultural processes, through which meanings are made shared, as a vital part of the political struggle.

At the time Owen Kelly worked as a community artist in South London and chaired the Greater London Arts Association's Community Arts Panel. He was also the author of 'Community, Art and the State: Storming the Citadels' published by Comedia and 'Digital Creativity' published by Gulbenkian. He lives and works in Helsinki where he is a board member of Pixelache (<http://pixelache.ac>)