

Pits and Perverts

by Marc Lenormand

The encounter between British miners and gay and lesbian activists during the strikes of 1984-85 was explored in the celebrated film *Pride*. A historian looks back at this memorable period and reveals the continuities between the two movements.

Reviewed: Marie Cabadi, *Lesbiennes et Gays au charbon : Solidarités avec les mineurs britanniques en grève, 1984-1985*, Paris, EHESS, 2023. 272 pp., €14.

The British miners' strike of 1984-1985 has been widely studied by scholars of the UK labour movement, as early as during the long months of the strike itself. This industrial dispute gave rise to extensive oral history projects and to analyses of the ways in which the state apparatus was deployed against the miners, as well as of the transformative impact, for women in mining communities, of their mobilization in support of the strike. The miners' strike has also been memorialized, not only within a trade union and activist culture—which nurtures memories of heroic defeats that have marked the struggle for social justice—but also in popular culture through commercially successful fictional works such as *Brassed Off* (1996), *Billy Elliott* (2000) and *Pride* (2014). So, is there nothing more to say about the miners' strike?

In her book *Lesbiennes & gays au charbon : Solidarités avec les mineurs britanniques en grève, 1984-1985* ["Lesbians and gays roll their sleeves up: Solidarity with the British miners, 1984-1985"], Marie Cabadi brilliantly shows that such is not the case. Drawing on the archives of the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) group housed at Manchester's Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC), she traces the trajectory of this organization that existed for just one year, situating it at the

intersection of the history of left-wing activism and the changing face of London's mid-1980s gay scene into which it offers insights. Cabadi's study ultimately provides an extended reflection on the conditions, forms and effects of the bonds of solidarity forged between a group of lesbian and gay activists based in London and members of the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valley Miners' Support Group.

The fields of labour history and industrial relations have recently been revitalized by the contribution of gender and LGBTQ studies. In particular, Cabadi builds on the research of Diarmaid Kelliher and Daryl Leeworthy, who, drawing on fieldwork from London and Wales respectively, have shed new light on the miners' strike, focusing on the intersection between LGBTQ struggles, left-wing activism and trade union struggles.

Recovering the history of LGSM behind *Pride*

One problem specific to Cabadi's historical work on the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) group is the success of the film *Pride*, released in cinemas in 2014. The film tells the story of this particular group of activists in a narrative arc leading from one Pride march to the next, from July 1984 to June 1985. Of course, when reading Cabadi's book, connoisseurs of the film will recognize the main narrative lines and have fun pointing out the liberties taken by the film with the LGSM story, as well as speculating on the origins of *Pride's* fictional characters. However, this is not Cabadi's intention, and she elegantly refrains from engaging in a comparison between the film and her own historical work. Instead, she pointedly states that the book should not be taken as "a historian's counter-narrative revealing the reality behind the film or the activist discourse." She asserts that "On the contrary, without the film, this book would never have seen the light of day" (p. 12).

This leaves Cabadi's book free of any critical concerns with regard to *Pride*, allowing it to provide a full account of LGSM's history, for which the minutes from seven meetings provide the primary source material. LGSM was founded in the summer of 1984, at a time when the strike was entering its fifth month, police and judicial repression had intensified considerably starting in June 1984, and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was opening up "to support from social movements organizing outside the labour movement" (p. 41).

Cabadi highlights both the scope and the traditional nature of the organization's repertoire of action: “demonstrations and rallies, public meetings and conferences, presence on picket lines, leafleting and street collections—all modes of operation that were in keeping with the usual repertoire of action of the labour movement and the British Left at the time,” even though “[the] most absorbing activity occupying LGSM members on a daily basis was primarily fundraising” (p. 52), which underscores LGSM's primary function of supporting mining communities.

LGSM was not just another support group set up by activists in London, but also a “model organization” for activists in the rest of the UK and Ireland. The other LGBTQ miners support groups Cabadi found evidence of were, however, mostly “based in towns close to coalfields”; they donated the money raised to nearby mining communities and were often characterized by strong sociological proximity (pp. 159-161). What sets LGSM apart was the solidarity forged between activists from the London metropolis and mining communities in the South Wales valleys.

LGSM and the Welsh valleys: building solidarity

The relationship of solidarity between LGSM and the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valley Miners' Support Group was established, technically speaking, through a process known as adoption, or twinning, which “consisted in creating strong, almost exclusive links between a support group organizing the strike in a mining community and a support group based outside it” (p. 41). Fundraising and money transfers were combined with reciprocal visits: activist and social weekends were organized in the South Wales valleys for LGSM members in October 1984, February 1985 and again at the beginning of March 1985; conversely, members of the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valley Miners' Support Group made trips down to London, culminating in the “Pits & Perverts” concert organized by LGSM on December 10, 1984.

These gatherings were times of “emotion, when strong personal ties were forged” (p. 50), “moments of sharing, eating together and socializing, which encouraged deeper personal connections and served to entertain the guests” (p. 174). Here, Cabadi echoes the analysis offered by Diarmaid Kelliher in his study of the support networks connecting London with the mining communities, where twinning

played a key role as a “distinct spatial tactic used by strike supporters to overcome geographical distance and encourage the development of personal relationships”¹.

However, Cabadi warns against conceiving of the relationship between LGSM and the Valleys support group as an “unlikely encounter”: the identification between the homosexuality of the LGSM activists and their London base contributes “to the invisibilisation of all historical traces of homosexuality in Wales,” even though Wales “and its rural areas have their own LGBTQ history, made up of places regarded as refuges and embraced by small collectives hoping to establish themselves at a distance from an overly heteronormative society” (pp. 179-180).

Positioning LGSM within the history of trade unionism and the Left

The idea of an “unlikely encounter” involving London activists was a recurrent source of comedy in the film *Pride*, but it also “ran the risk of othering homosexuality and making it extraneous to the socialist Left and the workers' movement” (p. 63). In contrast to such a watertight, mutually exclusive conception of social and political identities, the author highlights the trade union and partisan affiliations of LGSM members, as reconstructed from the group's archives.

The LGSM gay activists' support for the miners' strike should not therefore be construed in terms of strangeness, but rather in the light of the continuity of activist concerns and practices. This does not, however, resolve the possible tensions surrounding LGSM's position among miners' support groups, since at no time did LGSM present itself or even conceive of itself as a trade union body.

Many LGSM members were also members of political organizations on the British Left. As was the case with trade unions, gay and lesbian rights groups had been active for several years within these partisan organizations, which in turn contributed to a left-wing politicization of the struggle for gay rights.

Although LGSM's inclusion within the activist fabric of British trade unionism and the Left gives the group its rightful place in the history of connections between the labour movement and liberation struggles, Cabadi also highlights a striking link

¹ Kelliher, 2017, p. 597.

between the activism of the women of the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valley Miners' Support Group and the British peace movement, in particular with the feminist and lesbian wing of the latter, embodied by the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp.

LGSM and London's gay and lesbian scene

Yet this should not be taken to mean that Cabadi's work, by situating LGSM within a history of the British Left in the 1980s, removes it from the London gay and lesbian scene from which its members hailed. It was precisely in those spaces and places devoted to “mixing, meeting, hooking up and partying” that LGSM organized fundraising, which was “the most everyday and mundane of actions at the heart of LGSM's repertoire” (pp. 119-120).

While bars and nightclubs played a central role in the fundraising effort, they were just one part of a wider range of venues and establishments supporting gay and lesbian cultural life. Thus, while LGSM tried to ensure that the “Pits and Perverts” concert evening—held on December 10, 1984—would appeal to a wide audience by promoting it in the music press and local press, and by selling tickets outside of the network of gay and lesbian establishments, the group nevertheless relied primarily on the network and its own connections in the London gay and lesbian scene in order to bring together its lineup of artists (p. 235).

Cabadi also notes that this scene was “a predominantly white, male scene”: despite LGSM's stated ambition to recruit lesbians and gays alike, it “found itself in a vicious circle: with a shortage of lesbians in its ranks, the group was unable to ensure a regular presence in lesbian social spaces, which clearly limited its ability to recruit in those venues and thereby increase its proportion of lesbian members” (p. 135). It was this de facto narrowing of “mixed spaces” to “spaces designed for and by gay men” that led several lesbian activists who had initially joined LGSM to create the women-only group Lesbians Against Pit Closures (LAPC), as a way of broadening the strike support movement to “women who were not willing to attend meetings with men” (p. 213). Here, Cabadi draws a parallel with the path chosen by the women of the Neath, Dulais and Swansea valleys, who “began by taking part in the mixed group that had been created on a male initiative” before deciding, following negative

experiences, to “found an independent group, but one that maintained links with their original group” (p. 214).

If Cabadi's book simply offered a detailed history of LGSM and an examination of its activities, it would still constitute a significant contribution to our knowledge of support groups during the British miners' strike of 1984-1985. However, the book goes much further: using LGSM as a starting point to open up new perspectives on a connected history of activism in the mid-1980s, it contributes to the decompartmentalization of labour history and social movement studies, and proves that the 1984-1985 UK miners' strike still offers plenty of scope for study.

Further reading:

- Mathilde Bertrand, Cornelius Crowley, Thierry Labica, *Ici notre défaite a commencé. La grève des mineurs britanniques (1984-1985)*, Paris, Syllepse, 2016.
- Huw Beynon (ed.), *Digging Deeper. Issues in the Miners' Strike*, London, Verso, 1985.
- Diarmaid Kelliher, "Solidarity and Sexuality. Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners 1984-5", *History Workshop Journal*, n° 77, 2014, pp. 240-262.
- Diarmaid Kelliher, *Making Cultures of Solidarity. London and the 1984-5 Miners' Strike*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2021.
- Daryl Leeworthy, "For Our Common Cause. Sexuality and Left Politics in South Wales, 1967-1985", *Contemporary British History*, vol. 30, n° 2, 2016, pp. 260-280.
- Peter Purton, *Champions of Equality. Trade Unions and LGBT Rights in Britain*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2017.
- Helen Smith, *Masculinity, Class and Same-Sex Desire in Industrial England, 1895-1957*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

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