

Remembering Peterloo, Tonypandy and other incidents, it would be the more surprising if the Baldwin Government had not had secret plans for the use of military force and presence if in their adjudged opinion the security of the State had been threatened in 1926.

The Supply and Transport Committee of the British cabinet decided at a meeting on the 5th May 1926 "on the necessity to make a considerable show of force on the outbreak of serious disorder in any area".

1926 - Women support the Miners

Maureen Callcott

An impressive and moving feature of the recent miners' strike has been the supportive activity of women in mining communities. They have not only provided moral support but also massive back-up organisation to enable impoverished families to hold out for 12 months. This has both demonstrated and nourished their sensitivity about their communities. Here we have Mrs Bella Jolly's account of how the women of Stanley, County Durham, helped miners' families in 1926.* Mrs Jolly came to Stanley from Teesside in the early years of this century when she married Bill Jolly, a miner. She was horrified by the Stanley Pit Disaster of 1909 and when Keir Hardie visited the town they both joined the Independent Labour Party. From then on political activity was central to their lives. In 1922 Bella Jolly was co-opted to the Durham County Education Committee (and remained a member for 50 years), she was also a Stanley Councillor, a magistrate and a member of the Board of Guardians. Mr Jolly left the mines for health reasons in 1918 but they both remained committed to the interests of those working in the major industry in their region. Thus in 1926 Bella Jolly was centrally involved in organising the distribution of food, clothing and other resources in Stanley throughout the six months of the strike. She continues with her own story:

"By that time Mr Jolly was a Schoolboard Man, and they wanted women like me who could be free through the day to go and stop in the labour rooms to answer questions, and enquiries and things like that because men were picketing.

Well I was doing a bit of speaking for the Durham Miners and I was told whatever I had to do was keep my bike clear you know? and to do no outside speaking whatever. They couldn't do anything whilst I was inside but I must do no outside speaking. Everybody knew the fiasco of the general strike, but it was terrible while it lasted. By the time the strike broke out, we were running the child welfare centres, and the Welfares were able to give the children free food because the miners were just on 23s per week. If you were on the dole and just had a certain figure you could get 2 or 3 packets of baby food for the bairns so we continued that and the babies were fed, they were fed with the free food from the Welfare.

Now to the miners themselves, I was on the Board of Guardians at the time, we used to go and sit every day and we assessed the amount of relief, just in kind mind, no money, to the women and children. They got their vouchers for tea and sugar, and naturally the women gave the men the food, but there was no money. To help all relief cases we used to have bands parading and have collections, and these were what we called special cases, which needed maybe a bit extra nourishment. We used to meet twice a week and dole out these little bits of collections by giving a little bit of butter and a couple of eggs and a pint of milk. Everybody sent goods or money to the miners' relief fund. Maybe two or three stones (big bags of sugar) would come, chocolates from Rowntrees, biscuits from biscuit factories, piles and piles of old clothes from all over the country. The thing was how to get these things out to people. Well the Durham Miners' Hall took all this stuff, everything went direct from the donors and two days a week on Mondays and Thursdays, women like myself who were Labour Secretaries went into Durham and got this stuff. We brought clothes out, we brought chocolates, sugar, rice, peas, we brought everything that came, it was all shared out. Well we just had to carry it. There was just the bus, we had to get down from Redhills. We were just like pack horses. Now folks would come, 'Jimmy can't go to school without a pair of boots'. Well I would say we are going in on Monday give me his size and I will see if we can get him a pair. Come back on Monday Night, well I haven't been able to get them yet, but here's a coat for you, and we might manage to get you boots for Thursday take these now". Two women from each area went twice a week, all the time the strike lasted, to Durham, and brought everything conceivable that folks could send.

Great big bales of clothes from Leeds and places like that came, because the Labour folks were collecting among the universities and colleges and we got some really good stuff. Even hiking boots that had never been on, everything you could mention, suits that had hardly been worn real good stuff but that's the way we got them out. Now we weren't the only ones that were doing that because Labour women all over the country were doing it. I put three women's coats on and then carried other things on my shoulders, but we got them out, and for women that were having babies we had the child welfare and maternity centre, and we had a very sympathetic midwife, Nurse Cook would say "Mrs Jolly, Mrs so and so is going to have a baby and I've nothing to put on". "Well never mind come back in a few days time", and I'm not telling you a lie when I say that there wasn't a set of baby clothes left in Stanley by the time the strike was over. We cadged everything, and mind you just had to go and say now look you this is all we can get, but we'll get you something when the woman has her baby we'll let you have the things. And I guess, somebody was talking about baby clothes and someone said "There's no baby clothes left in Stanley Mrs Jolly's got them all". They couldn't have carried on if we didn't have the collections. You see the miners carried on after the general strike broke, when they put the leaders in prison, the miners went it alone. They were very bitter, but they wouldn't give in, no they said we'll go it alone. Well they went for 6 months and fortunately during all that 6 months I don't think we had two days rain, it was gorgeous weather.

The Welfare was looking after the babies, and the food vouchers the women were getting were giving the men a bite to eat. We were getting through this relief fund as many clothes that we could, and were getting money for special items for folks that were sick so in the main the wheels were running on. The only thing was there was no money, the rents were running on and people had to go to bed at night because they hadn't pennies for the lights and things like that . . .

Mind some of them (Building Societies) were very good, some of the societies stopped the payments until the strike was over, and even landlords,

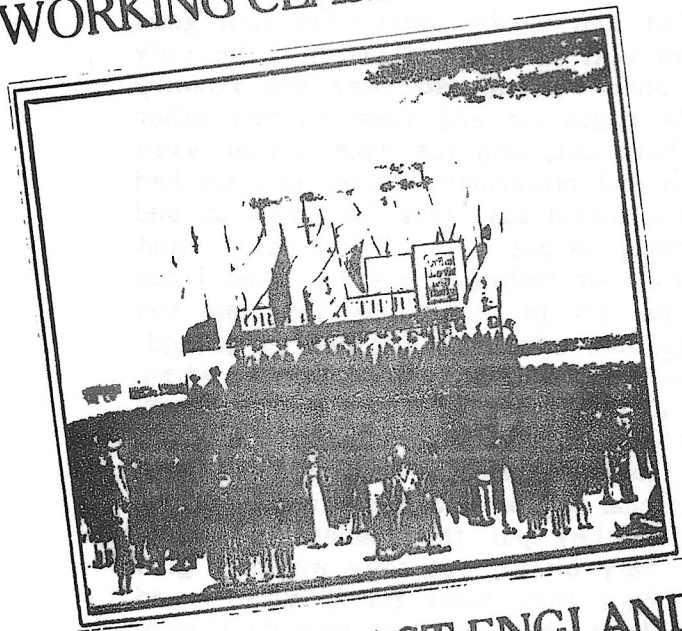
because they didn't have council houses like they have now, some of them just didn't bother going for the rents until the strike was over. And let it be said that private landlords told me that at 6d. and 1s 0d per week after the miners got back to work they got their money back and people who had let the tick out, grocery shops etc., got it all back and the (Cooperative) let their regular members, let them run on, some as high as £20 to £30. That was a lot of money then. It was a lot, not like money now. You talk about money now like peas.

Most of the private landlords were kind, they really couldn't put people out, there was no where to put them, really it was the best thing to let the money run up and trust to the good grace of the folk. The shopkeepers told me that they got every penny back, and the Store certainly did. The Store was in a better position because when they started trading again they had their dividend and they could wipe off, before they paid dividend what they owed.

Well that's how we got through the miners' strike. If the Labour movement has to go down in history, one of its finest achievements is how the women stood by their men in 1926, and I really believe that. If ever I had to say what was the greatest achievement of the labour movement it would be the miners' strike."

*The account is taken from a tape-recording of an interview with Mr and Mrs Jolly made in 1970 by Maureen Callcott and Norman McCord.

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