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## **Constructing a culture of solidarity: London and the British coalfields in the long 1970s**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores relationships of solidarity constructed between London and the British coalfields from 1968 until the 1984-5 miners' strike. Foregrounding the development of a culture of solidarity over this period resituates the support movement during the 1984-5 strike as embedded in longer term relationships, which suggests a more equal relationship between coalfield and metropolitan activists than is given by focusing narrowly on the year itself. I argue that a spatially and temporally dynamic sense of the development of these relationships allows us to better grasp the potentially mutual nature of solidarity. Thinking about the construction of this culture of solidarity can contribute significantly to understanding the nature of labour agency. I emphasise the generative nature of solidarity, particularly the ways in which the spatial and social boundaries of the labour movement were challenged through solidarity relationships, allowing in some instances a more diverse conception of working-class politics.

### **Praxis abstract**

This article is centrally concerned with the development of relationships of solidarity between different localities over an extended period of time. While the 1984-5 miners' strike was in many ways a spectacular event, I try to show that the significant level of support it received in part relied on the development of relationships in the previous fifteen years. It is of course necessary to respond to specific political events, but this is itself easier if more longstanding relationships have been constructed. In particular, if solidarity is to be a mutual relationship this is far more likely to develop over an extended timeframe. I also wanted to highlight two specific things politically: that relationships of solidarity can help develop a class politics that takes seriously race, gender, and sexuality; and specifically for the UK, the need and possibility of productive political relations between the London left and the old industrial heartlands.

## **Keywords**

Solidarity; labour; agency; temporality; London; British coalfields

## **Introduction**

During the year-long 1984-5 British coal miners' strike, Yorkshire Area National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) President Jack Taylor appealed for support: 'we deserve it [...] We've never turned us backs on anybody in our union, never. We've always stood with anybody who wanted to fight' (Union of Communication Workers 1984). The belief that miners had consistently supported others was invoked repeatedly during the dispute by the NUM at national and local levels, and by their supporters. Yet this was not a one-sided history of solidarity. A sense of mutual support was recalled by London activists to describe longstanding relationships between the miners and their city. This article explores how a relationship of solidarity was developed between the British coalfields and the capital from the late 1960s until the mid-1980s.

Recent popular portrayals marking thirty years since the 1984-5 strike have drawn inspiration from the support movement of that year (Kelliher 2015). This article argues that placing this movement in a longer historical context has important consequences for how we view the dispute, allowing for a complex but more equal relationship between metropolitan and coalfield activists. I argue that tracing networks of solidarity through an expanded temporal frame allows us to better grasp the mutuality of solidaristic relationships. This mutuality constituted a culture of solidarity, albeit an uneven and contested one, in which labour activists could and did expect to receive support during struggles. This points to ways in which working-class activists helped shape the structures in which they operated, and therefore can contribute significantly to debates within labour geography on the nature of working-class agency (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011). This culture of solidarity was rooted in a sense of a 'labour movement', but I explore ways in which the spatial and social boundaries of this movement were challenged, allowing in some instances a more diverse conception of working-class politics. The development of solidarity relationships between London and the coalfields, significantly different places in many ways, highlighted the relational construction of identities from below through political activism.

This article is based on archival research in London and former coal mining areas. It employs

diverse sources to reconstruct the relationships emerging in this period between grassroots activists. Pursuing these connections across a range of archives, from official trade union repositories to less formal collections, enables me to develop a networked history that emphasises the mobility of solidarity activism. I first situate this research in the context of debates on solidarity, local and relational constructions of identity, and questions of diversity and working-class agency in labour geography. Following this, I outline the 1984-5 support movement in London, foregrounding the ways in which solidarity was conceptualised at the time. I then describe how this support was embedded in longer relationships, focusing on the 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes, and the 1976-8 Grunwick dispute as key examples. Finally, I emphasise the importance of feminist, black and LGBT activists in challenging the terms on which labour movement politics was conducted. In highlighting the importance of historicizing the development of translocal labour solidarities this paper seeks to contribute to calls for a conversation between labour geography and labour history (Featherstone and Griffin 2015).

### **Solidarity, place and labour agency**

Geographers writing about the 1984-5 strike in its aftermath debated the nature of political cultures within the coalfields (Rees 1985; 1986; Sunley 1986; Renouf 1989), in particular analysing 'spatially uneven' participation in the strike (Blomley 1994:154; Griffiths and Johnston 1991). While some historical work (e.g. Francis and Smith 1998) has discussed internationalist activism in mining areas, the emphasis was on the dynamics within particular coalfield localities and regions. The coalfields were, according to Massey and Wainwright (1985:150), 'some of the most self-enclosed and socially homogeneous regions of the country'. Local solidarities contributed to the '(fragile and imperfect) social achievement' of constructing mining communities (Tomaney 2015a:512). Nyden (2010:174) has argued that solidarity between miners 'around the world was forged both by the dangerous nature of mining itself and by the kinds of communities in which miners live', specifically their geographical isolation.

The coalfields could therefore be seen as an ideal case for Tomaney's (2013) defence of parochialism. Tomaney (2015b:531) criticises an over emphasis on relational understandings of place, part of a normative orthodoxy in human geography 'which, influenced by a cosmopolitan ethic, generally disparages local attachments for their tendency to be exclusionary'. Tomaney (2013:669) rightly argues that beyond the local the 'obstacles to achieving larger solidarities are

formidable', reiterating the problems of scale Harvey (1995) highlights in his reflections on 'militant particularism'. There is a risk, however, of conflating 'place-based' with 'place-restricted' (Routledge and Cumbers 2009:197). Moreover, the conception of scaling-up can miss the ways in which place-based militant cultures can themselves be constructed relationally (Featherstone 2005). Neither local nor broader attachments are inherently progressive or reactionary; white labourist ideology, for example, shows the potential for racist internationalism (Hyslop 1999). Nevertheless, it is difficult to conceive of a progressive politics that remains confined to local solidarities. This paper therefore builds on extensive thinking about the solidarity internal to coalfields, offering a more expansive conception that highlights important links between coalfield and metropolitan activists.

Rather than only emphasising local coalfield solidarities then, it is necessary to recognise that solidarity can be a distinctly 'generative' spatial political practice that constructs 'relations between places, activists, diverse social groups' (Featherstone 2012:5, 9). Recent work on decolonizing solidarity, however, has highlighted some of the difficulties in organising across difference, particularly where relationships 'are fraught with power asymmetries' (Sundberg 2007:145). Mott (2016:197) argues in relation to white/settler support for indigenous struggles in north America that it is crucial 'to allow the indigenous partners in multiracial projects to take the lead'. Gould (2007:157) suggests that this principle of 'deference', defined as a requirement to allow those receiving solidarity 'to determine the forms of aid or support most beneficial to them', is necessary 'to avoid the imposition on the others of the customary expectations and practices of those offering aid.' This sense of deference can be in tension, however, with thinking about solidarity that emphasises its reciprocal nature. Both Sundberg (2007) and Land (2015) have suggested that even where such power imbalances exist there is the possibility for mutual exchange and learning, and a political struggle that seeks social change benefiting all involved.

In their work on the anti-apartheid movement in London, Brown and Yaffe (2014:35) have made the case for the mutuality of solidarity powerfully, arguing that rather than 'an asymmetrical flow of assistance travelling from one place to another' as it is often conceived, 'relations of solidarity can travel in more than one direction simultaneously, building complex webs of reciprocity'. Solidarity relationships may therefore 'seek to enact concrete social change in more than one location simultaneously' (Brown and Yaffe 2014:38). They describe how activists in the City of

London Anti-Apartheid Group highlighted British economic and political support for apartheid South Africa and drew connections between racism and oppression in both countries. The City Group were embedded in broader networks of campaigners in Britain and internationally who supported each other, as well as offering solidarity to the black majority in South Africa (Brown and Yaffe 2014:38–9; 44–47).

However, despite these entangled activist networks and the ways in which City Group drew connections between oppression in both countries there is, understandably, little sense of mutual relationships of support with South Africa's black population. Reciprocal solidarity may be more likely in relationships that do not involve large asymmetries of power and privilege (Routledge and Cumbers 2009:163). Case-study approaches can also reinforce a one-sided impression of solidarity, as in any one instance there is usually a group that is primarily receiving support. Rather than emphasising the simultaneously reciprocal nature of solidarity (Brown and Yaffe 2014:35), therefore, it can be more useful to see this mutuality constructed across time. A broader attention to the temporalities of political struggle is therefore necessary (Antentas 2015). As Cumbers et al. (2010:68) have argued, 'past processes of activism and class consciousness remain as latent reserves that can be drawn upon for present and future collective struggles'. Such latent reserves are central to an understanding of the labour movement, an important example of mutual solidarity. While reciprocity and mutuality are sometimes used synonymously, mutuality suggests a more temporally expansive relationship that better describes the development of a culture of solidarity.

This article emphasises the contribution a spatially and temporally dynamic understanding of solidarity can make to theorising labour agency. The desire to return a sense of agency to working-class people from capital-centred accounts has been central to labour geography since the label was first applied (Herod 1997). Subsequently, concern has been expressed that this agency has been unproblematically asserted or insufficiently theorised (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011; Peck 2013). Rather than simply re-emphasizing constraints, there is a need to historicize structure and agency even within the confines of capitalism. Featherstone and Griffin (2015:7) highlight the risk of seeing constraints on agency 'as given rather than constantly renegotiated, reworked and politicized in various ways'. The structures in which labour activists operate is a matter of contestation over time and therefore agency depends on previous struggles. The creation of a

culture of solidarity is an important example of the way in which labour activists helped shape the structures in which they operated.

The labour movement must be understood dynamically, always in the process of being defined and constructed. EP Thompson's (1980:8) insistence on class as 'an active process, which owes as much to agency as conditioning' is important. It is an understanding that allows for diverse political activism in shaping class consciousness, and key here is the way a number of movements from the late 1960s sought to contest the boundaries of labour movement politics. Virdee (2014), for instance, has argued that anti-racist activists in the 1970s were important to winning sections of the British working-class to an anti-racist consciousness. In their work on the 1976-8 Grunwick dispute and the 2005 Gate Gourmet strike, both led predominately by Asian women, McDowell et al. (2012:134) have argued for the need to engage with 'the complex intersections between class, gender and ethnicity at different historical moments' (see also Griffin 2015; Ince et al. 2015). By focusing on the interaction between autonomously organised women, LGBT, black and trade union activists, I emphasise the ways in which forms of intersectional politics are constructed across space and time through relationships of solidarity.

This is crucial for understanding the emergence of the diverse support movement of 1984-5. Much commentary at the time and since has emphasised the novelty of the relationships developed in that year, 'the birth of a new kind of politics' (Howells 1985). Such relationships, however, require contextualizing. The support movement must be seen in terms of the longer gestation of these relationships, which can significantly impact both how we think about the miners' strike itself, and more broadly about the spatialities and temporalities of solidarity.

### **Solidarity and the 1984-5 miners' strike**

The miners' strike began in March 1984 in protest against plans for widespread closures in the industry. Alongside this industrial struggle emerged 'a massive support movement [...] with as broad a social and geographical base as any post-war radical political movement' (Massey and Wainwright 1985:149). Within London, as elsewhere, long-standing elements of the labour movement and the broader left were central to this support. At the same time, more novel formations developed; in the capital these included Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM), Black Delegation to the Miners, and a number of feminist support groups (Kelliher 2014; Bishop

1984; *Spare Rib* 1985). It is difficult to estimate the total number of support groups but a survey produced by the Labour Research Department (1985) received responses from over three hundred organisations. This diverse movement helped sustain over 150,000 miners and their families for a year primarily through collecting money and food. The central London NUM Support Committee distributed up to £40,000 a month through the coalfields but this was only a small proportion of what was coming from the city (London NUM Support Committee 1984). Alongside fundraising, London activists joined picket lines, promoted the miners' cause at meetings and on the streets, marched, and took supportive industrial action.

London had a broad range of support activity, which suggested the city was a key hub of solidarity networks. However, the capital was often perceived as the coalfields' antithesis: a large, cosmopolitan and diverse city, as opposed to the small, socially conservative, working-class pit villages often associated with mining areas (Massey and Wainwright 1985:151; Douglass 2010:19). This fed into debates about how to conceptualise support during the dispute. Historian Raphael Samuel (1986a:x) believed that it 'was not affinity which drew sympathy and support for the miners, but in the first place difference – the uniqueness of the pit villages in the landscape of contemporary life'. For Samuel, support from London and the south-east of England appeared 'cross-class in character, more akin to the 1920s adoption of pit villages in the Rhondda by places like Bournemouth and Hampstead, than to solidarity' (Samuel 1986b:33). This reflected a conflation of class and region in which London is frequently considered middle-class. The London printworkers who were among the most active supporters of the miners were unlikely to fit this depiction. One printworker on visiting the South Yorkshire coalfield explained that 'you're looking in the mirror, you see yourself. So that's why you give support' (Anthony 1985).

More broadly, Samuel positions solidarity somewhat mechanically as a result of pre-given similarities within a group. Certainly, common experiences of oppression can form the basis for shared identification and potentially therefore of resistance (Shelby 2002). However, a sense of shared experiences is neither entirely static nor endlessly malleable. Groups such as Black Delegation and LGSM highlighted the experiences of metropolitan black and lesbian and gay people which, while different in many ways from the coalfields, overlapped with mining communities' experience of police harassment and media hostility during the strike (Kelliher 2014:248–252; Black Delegation to the Miners 1984). As Brown and Yaffe (2014:40) have argued, it



is important not to separate the ways in which solidarity is framed discursively from how it is enacted. The ability to make these connections in experience across diverse places was dependent on the practical solidarity work of raising money, joining picket lines and so on. It was through 'working class solidarity', LGSM argued, that they sought to overcome 'the divisions created by homophobia' (Jackson 1984).

The possibility of enacting these solidarities reflected in part the exceptional circumstances. Linebaugh (2014:211) has pointed to the tendency of disasters to produce forms of commoning and class solidarity, 'starting in the kitchen'. There is a parallel during such an extended dispute as the miners' strike, which out of necessity produced communal kitchens, and brought together individuals and groups who may have never met otherwise. This emphasis, however, can miss the way in which support in exceptional times depends at least in part on the networks built up over a longer period. Past struggles weighed like a nightmare on the brains of the living, frequently invoked by coalfield activists and their supporters (Marx 1968 [1852]). Some miners could draw direct family connections to the defeat of the 1926 General Strike and miners' lockout. Jim Phillips (2012:24) has described a Scottish miner recounting how in the welfares, pubs and clubs in his area he would meet veterans of 1926, and that after 1984-5 he felt he could look them in the eye. The strong sense of the coalfield past was maintained through oral traditions, the miners' banners, the galas and the union supported histories (Pitt 1979; Francis and Smith 1998). This created a powerful sense of communities of solidarity across time, both in localities and throughout the coalfields, which contributed significantly to the ability of mining areas to maintain a strike for twelve months.

The construction of place and industry-based identities and communities, however, also involved memorialising broader solidarities, not least those miners who fought on the republican side in the Spanish Civil War (Francis 1984; Mates 2006). In 1984-5, national mining officials and local coalfield activists appealed to both traditions. Kent Communist Miners (1984) recalled local and national disputes from 1941 to 1974 but also insisted that Kent miners had never 'rejected an appeal from fellow workers for unity and help.' Those urging support for the miners in other industries pointed to times when miners had helped them (Slater 1984). Yet London activists could also point to support they had given to miners in the 1970s, evoking an entangled history of mutual solidarity rather than a simple returning of support (Brent Trades Council 1984). Recounting such

relationships helped catalyse the support movement but activists also drew on the idea that historically miners had 'a very special place in the British Labour movement' (*UCATT Viewpoint* 1984). Within the polarised political landscape of the early 1980s, this historical understanding put the miners' strike in the forefront of the struggle against the Conservatives, making it a focus for opponents of Thatcherism.

These narratives were contested. Yorkshire miner Dave Douglass (2010:13) noted that miners 'were rarely if ever called into other workers' disputes, although we always thought every other worker in the country should be called into ours'. Those asked to support the miners could argue that miners were relatively insular or had been hostile to other workers' disputes (M.F. 1984; Beckett 2009:80). The counter-narratives of those who questioned the miners' historical solidarity were themselves not unproblematic, on occasion providing justification for refusing support during 1984-5. Just as mining communities were 'fragile and imperfect' social achievements (Tomaney 2015a:512), broader relationships were themselves uneven but nevertheless not entirely fictive. The discourse of mutual solidarity was a political tactic that did not always acknowledge the limitations of these relationships but it was not simply rhetoric. There were examples during the 1984-5 strike and its immediate aftermath of overlapping reciprocal solidarity (Brown and Yaffe 2014:35). Coalfield activists joined picket lines of striking hospital workers in East London who visited mining areas to give support; Kent miners marched in an anti-racist demonstration in West London where Black Delegation to the Miners drew much of their support; and the solidarity of LGSM was returned when the Blaenant Lodge NUM banner from South Wales was carried on the 1985 London Lesbian and Gay Pride march (Kelliher 2014; *London Labour Briefing* 1984; Neal 1984).

Nevertheless, miners and their families inevitably received far more support in 1984-5 than they gave. It is significant, however, that activists rooted this solidarity in a longer trajectory of ongoing reciprocal support, and it is therefore in an expanded time frame that we can better understand the mutuality of solidarity. The ability of coalfield activists to appeal for and receive support, crucial in sustaining the strike for so long, was therefore dependent on the development of a culture of solidarity. The next section of the paper outlines how this relationship of mutual solidarity between London and the coalfields was actively constructed during the 1970s.

### **Mutual solidarity in the 1970s**

The late 1960s and early 1970s in Britain saw rising trade union membership, shop steward power and often successful industrial action. It was, according to one analysis, 'the most intense period of class struggle in Britain' since the early twentieth century (Darlington and Lyddon 2001:2). The British strike wave of 1969-74 was, for Darlington and Lyddon (2001:2), 'one fragment of the international revolt of the late 1960s and early 1970s', which included the Vietnam war, the 1968 French general strike, the Italian 'hot autumn' of 1969, the overthrow of fascist and military regimes in Portugal, Spain and Greece, and the challenges to Czechoslovakian and Polish states. These were disparate events and not every trade unionist in Britain or elsewhere connected wage struggles with the war in Vietnam, but a minority did. In the context of the United States, Steve Early (2010) has pointed to an alliance of 1960s social movements and militant trade unionists in these years that had a significant impact on the labour movement. An analogous and related process took place in Britain, which is important for understanding the nature of solidarity in this period.

While trade union activists often focused on their own workplaces, there was significant solidarity across industries, and networks of support were developed both within and beyond Britain. Within the coal industry, rank-and-file pressure for better wages built through unofficial action in the late 1960s (Scargill 1975:9–11). Dave Douglass (2009:47) described how in 1969 they 'flooded into London, much to the amazement of London cab drivers and station staff who assumed there were no coal mines left in Britain', for a demonstration at the National Coal Board's offices. In 1972 and 1974 there were official national miners' strikes for the first time since 1926, both overwhelmingly successful. They drew on significant solidarity from others, including transport workers not moving fuel (Darlington and Lyddon 2001:215; Phillips 2006:194). This support was invoked in 1984 when the NUM would appeal for 'all our brothers and sisters in the power stations to give the NUM the same support as the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974' (National Union of Mineworkers n.d.).

Support in London developed in ways that prefigured the 1984-5 support movement. Hackney Trades Council, based in a largely working-class London borough, 'adopted' Nottinghamshire's Clipstone Colliery during the 1974 dispute (Knowles 1974). The idea of groups of supporters twinning with or adopting particular collieries became especially popular in 1984-5 (Labour Research Department 1985:29). Twinning is primarily associated with towns linked at an official

level (Clarke 2009) but Routledge and Cumbers (2009:169) have written about grassroots, international trade union bi-lateral twinning arrangements, which developed 'deep and well-established transnational links and personal connections'. Twinning was an attempt by activists to encourage more enduring relationships and trades councils were, and still can be, important institutions in the labour movement capable of developing such broader connections (Wills 2001). After visiting Nottinghamshire, Hackney Trades Council (1974) described how they had developed links of trade union solidarity, as well as 'foundations of warm personal relationships'.

The emphasis on the personal here is important, reflecting Routledge's (2012:430) contention that 'shared emotions of activism create shared collective identities'. Understanding the influence of relationships among activists requires attention to small stories that can highlight how broader issues are played out 'on personal and intimate terms' (Lorimer 2003:214). For example, Di Parkin (2007:iii) recalled first meeting miners as a student in Kent during the 1972 dispute. She encountered them again on other picket lines in Oxford and London during the 1970s, and in 1984, while living in Hackney, provided accommodation for a picketing Kent miner who she had met twelve years previously. Such long-standing personal connections established through solidarity created important links between London and the coalfields.

Familial connections also played a role, suggesting that the populations of coalfields were more porous than is often allowed for. One London supporter in 1984 whose husband was the son of a South Yorkshire miner wrote that 'the solidarity of the mining community spreads far beyond the coalfield!' (Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures 1984). This sense of a politicised coalfield diaspora had a longer history; supporters in Oxford in 1984-5 noted the crucial role migrant Welsh miners played in organising trade unionism there in the 1930s (Thornett 1985). While picketing a London power station in 1972, Kent miners were fed in Woolwich Polytechnic because the Student Union President was a Welsh miner's son (Pitt 1979:156). In 1984 family connections were responsible for twinning arrangements made by the Neath, Dulais and Swansea Valley Miners Support Group with both the Brent branch of the local authority workers' union NALGO and LGSM (Donovan 1986; Hall Carpenter Archives Gay Men's Oral History Group 1989:215). These connections could be fraught, and LGSM sought through solidarity to change the nature of the working-class communities that they felt compelled to leave (Kelliher 2014:251-2). LGSM highlights the need to engage with the intersection of class and sexuality, which has received

comparatively little attention from geographers of sexuality (Binnie 2011; Brown 2012). In particular, while there has been significant discussion on migration and sexuality (Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011), LGSM points towards a way in which activists politicised this relationship. Personal and familial connections were important for long-lasting solidarity relationships, then, but they could also be contentious.

One important way Londoners supported the 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes was to provide accommodation for the 'flying pickets', as was done by some trades councils, far-left organisations and student unions (Knowles 1974; Pitt 1979:177; Webster 1974). The use of flying pickets, of which Yorkshire miners in the late 1960s were at least early adopters, was an attempt to use highly mobile groups of workers to spread disputes quickly and outflank the police. At the peak of the 1972 strike, car-loads of two hundred miners travelled from Kent to London daily. Kent miner Malcolm Pitt (1979:17, 150) commented that it was 'on the gates of Longannet, Barking, Battersea and West Thurrock [power stations] that the battle of the miners was won.' While the capital and the coalfields were, mostly, far from each other, picketing power stations nevertheless highlighted their significant material entanglement (Featherstone 2012:18; Brown and Yaffe 2014). The discourse of solidarity was significant but it was always enacted in specific sites and spaces. The flying picket was a particularly threatening tactic that the Conservative government challenged during the 1984-5 dispute through legislation and police blockades, so that 'movement through space [...] became an essential tactical concern for both union and antistrike forces' (Blomley 1994:152).

While movement was important, it was also necessary to have spaces in which solidarity could be both organised and enacted. One of the most famous examples of solidarity during the 1972 miners' strike took place at the Saltley coke depot, which was closed when miners' pickets were joined by thousands of Birmingham engineering and car workers (Darlington and Lyddon 2001:56–64). The support at Saltley was argued for by networks of local activists, especially those in the Communist Party, and by the NUM's Arthur Scargill speaking to trade union meetings in the city (Douglass 2009:169; Scargill 1975:17–18). Recent historical studies have emphasised the active construction of cultures of solidarity within workplaces and industries, with left-wing activists and shop stewards often playing a crucial role (Saunders 2015; Darlington 2002). Dave Douglass' (2010:21) description of South Yorkshire miners discussing industrial action in support of NHS

workers in 1982 similarly shows the importance of activists arguing in mass workplace meetings for solidarity across industries. Such meetings were key spaces for developing networks of solidarity in the 1970s and would continue to be so during the 1984-5 dispute.

This was particularly evident during the 1976-8 Grunwick strike in the London Borough of Brent, a central dispute for establishing relationships between the coalfields and the capital. This strike in a photo processing plant, largely led by Asian women including Jayaben Desai, received significant support from the labour movement. Grunwick strikers undertook what local trade unionist Jack Dromey described as an 'unprecedented' tour of the country, speaking at possibly thousands of workplaces seeking support for the strike, including addressing miners from Kent to Scotland (Thomas 2007). This way of mobilising support would be employed on perhaps an even greater scale during the 1984-5 miners' strike. Together with flying pickets, this movement across Britain—and internationally during the miners' strike—helped generate solidarity networks, suggesting a distinctive working-class form of politicised mobility (Cresswell 2010). The case for solidarity was not just made by the Grunwick supporters but had to come from within the coalfields as well, with one miner arguing presciently in their trade union journal: 'to those who say Grunwick has nothing to do with them, I say: don't ask other trade unions, then, for support when we miners need it' (Harrison 1977).

Anitha et al. (2012:769) have challenged 'celebratory accounts of Grunwick as a turning point in British labour history' that were 'subsequently constructed by the trade unions'. The dispute highlighted significant fractures in the labour movement and the limits of the support were evident. Nevertheless, recognising its limitations does not mean dismissing this support entirely. In the middle of 1977, 'miners, dockers, engineers and building workers swelled the picket' at Grunwick to thousands strong (Grunwick Strike Committee 1977b). In July 1977 a 'Day of Action' was apparently initiated by the South Wales NUM. One Yorkshire picket believed there were 1,300 Yorkshire miners at Grunwick that day (Newsreel Collective 1977). Miners came as well from Kent and Scotland, the other left-wing areas of the NUM. The varying political cultures of mining areas significantly impacted the likelihood of miners supporting other struggles (Sunley 1986; Renouf 1989). Yet these political cultures should not be understood statically, rooted solely in an immutable tradition. Yorkshire in particular belied its previously moderate reputation within the NUM to take a leading role in activism from the late 1960s onwards. These Yorkshire activists were

crucial in disputes both within and beyond their industry, as can be seen by the numbers travelling to Grunwick. This support had a direct impact on the 1984-5 miners' strike; one Brent activist commented that 'we had people, the Indian community in particular, saying they were supporting the miners because of the support they gave at Grunwick' (Baxter 1984).

The solidarity was memorialised, with an image of NUM officials leading the miners' pickets at Grunwick used for a Yorkshire Area NUM banner (Douglass 2009:406). The Kent NUM hung a painting in their office donated by Grunwick strikers and local trade union officers who had visited the area to show their appreciation for the support (Parkin 2007:79). In a similar way to which struggles in the pits were commemorated to strengthen the solidarity within mining communities, this memorialising of disputes such as Grunwick encouraged a culture of mutual solidarity across the labour movement. Rather than simply an obligation to reciprocate support, this was an attempt to create deeper and more equal relationships. While 'the potential for workers action should always be seen in relation to the formations of capital, the state, the community and the labour market' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011:214), such efforts to construct cultures of solidarity must also be taken into account. The growth of militant grassroots trade unionism from the late 1960s, rooted in long-standing conceptions of the 'labour movement', was the basis on which this could happen but, as I argue in the next section, this developed in parallel with movements challenging conventional constructions of working-class politics.

### **Contesting the labour movement**

The Grunwick dispute was also important because the labour movement support was, according to the strikers, 'unprecedented for a struggle of Asian and West Indian workers for basic Trade Union rights' (Grunwick Strike Committee 1977a). Certainly, as argued at the time and since (Sivanandan 1982:126–131; McDowell, Anitha, and Pearson 2012), the strike did not eliminate all problems with race or gender in the labour movement. Nevertheless, Virdee (2014:135) has maintained that it helped reinforce the ways in which sections of organised labour moved towards a language of class that could include racialized minority workers during the 1970s. Mass pickets such as those at Grunwick provided spaces in which diverse groups could come together. In an analysis of early twentieth-century disputes in Chicago and London, Percy (2014:458) has argued that strikers' parades and picket lines 'enabled marginal workers to find a place to voice their demands and make their presence known.' One Yorkshire miner expressed the sense of the diverse Grunwick

picket line in a recent interview: 'There were students, women demonstrators shouting ... an actual gay group, who we got talking to. A group of guys standing there who were obviously gay. Standing there in unity with sacked workers. I'd never met people like that. There were good feelings there. There were working-class people regardless of race, age, colour' (Beckett 2009:403). Part of what was new at Grunwick was this coming together of trade union and radical London activists around an industrial dispute in ways that prefigured the alliances described by Massey and Wainwright (1985:151) and others during 1984-5.

Picket lines can also be conflictual and exclusionary spaces, even for those ostensibly on the same side. At Grunwick, Gail Lewis was among the significant number of feminist activists present, and she experienced on the picket line both solidarity and care, and sexism (Campbell and Charlton 1977:46). Lesbian activists described how 'members of the Gay Left Collective were turned away from the [Grunwick] picket line by workers who would not link arms with them' (Vittorini, Field, and Methol 1986). Others suggested a more positive experience. Nigel Young, who would be involved with LGSM in 1984-5, joined a number of picket lines in the 1970s including Grunwick where lesbians and gays 'have been in much evidence [...] which not only gives us a feeling of mutual solidarity but also shows other workers our presence' (Young 1977:15). There is a politics of agonism here but perhaps more interesting is how picket lines could offer the sense of a common purpose where in other spaces conflict may have been anticipated. The feminist Sarah Greaves felt that 'if you bumped against some miners in a pub there would be all sorts of sexist stuff. But at Grunwick you thought they had the same feeling that we did' (Campbell and Charlton 1977:46).

Picket lines and labour protests are important spaces in which a working-class presence is asserted, but also where the nature of this presence can be negotiated (Featherstone and Griffin 2015; Griffin 2015). Coalfield activists were in London in 1972 when five dock shop stewards were jailed in Pentonville, north London for ignoring an injunction by the National Industrial Relations Court to stop picketing a site in Newham. This was greeted by strikes and demonstrations, with at least South Wales and Yorkshire miners threatening industrial action if they were not released (Darlington and Lyddon 2001:164; Douglass 2009:177). Tony Merrick, one of the jailed, recalled a demonstration outside the prison: 'I can remember the Welsh miners coming down, and we could hear... It was a terrific effect [...] this Welsh choir of men came above the crowd and this was really



really great' (Merrick 1980). This was the assertion of a distinctly Welsh working-class presence in north London. Members of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) also attended pickets outside Pentonville. Nettie Pollard recalled that they faced hostility but also gained some support for offering solidarity, and started debates on sexuality that would not have happened had they not been there (Power 1995:80). Similarly, GLF activists attended a large trade union march in London protesting the Conservative government's Industrial Relations Bill, where they experienced significant antagonism from the left but again some support for their presence, particularly from Durham miners (Robinson 2007:83). These were not easy meetings, with hostility recalled by GLF participants more than anything else, but they began conversations between diverse political activists that could only happen in these spaces of solidarity.

We can see earlier, perhaps smaller, incarnations of the black, feminist, and lesbian and gay support around Grunwick and the 1984-5 strike during the 1972 coal dispute, including solidarity from the GLF and the Indian Workers Association (Dar n.d.; Goodspeed 2014). Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) activists asserted that they 'unconditionally support the miners and their families in their struggle against the government' and planned practical support (The Miners' Strike and the Women's Liberation Movement 1972). Rather than seeing the diverse solidarities of the 1984-5 strike as entirely novel then, this situates them as part of a longer engagement between post-1968 liberation politics and the labour movement (Humphrey 2000; Rowbotham 2006; Virdee 2014). The WLM support was unconditional but not uncritical, highlighting the marginalisation of women within the NUM. While the idea of deference (Gould 2007:157) in solidarity may be appropriate in certain circumstances, it is too static to capture this relationship, which rather highlighted the 'generative, transformative character of solidarity' (Featherstone 2012:19).

It is important not to conceive of these challenges to the labour movement as being entirely external, nor to reductively label often explicitly socialist activists as engaged in identity politics (Rutherford 2010:771). Black, women and lesbian and gay activists within the labour movement were themselves seeking to recast understandings of who counted as working class, and what was considered working-class politics. This was made clear by Pragna Patel of Black Delegation to the Miners, a group that supported the Kent coalfield in 1984-5. In a recent interview she argued that 'the aim was very much to situate ourselves as part of a wider labour movement, and although the wider labour movement has often failed black workers and so on, nevertheless we felt that critique

can be mounted whilst you're still situated within it' (Patel 2011). Massey and Wainwright (1985:168) argued at the time that the 'mutual dependence and a new openness to influence' between new social movements and trade unions 'demonstrated a different direction for class politics' rather than its abandonment.

Expanding the sense of class politics included labour movement involvement beyond industrial disputes, and this could be seen in some of the interactions between London and the coalfields in the 1970s. Of course, many coalfield activists were already part of broad political networks, most obviously through the Labour and Communist Parties. It is significant nevertheless that in the late 1970s a Miners Against Nazis meeting held in Sheffield to discuss combating the fascist National Front, attended by 200 delegates from across the coalfields, was addressed by an activist from the East London Asian Defence Group (*Yorkshire Miner* 1979). Four coachloads of Yorkshire miners were among the trade unionists who joined the 1978 Anti-Nazi league/Rock Against Racism carnival in London, with the NUM's Arthur Scargill as one of the platform speakers (*The Miner* 1978). There was also significant involvement by coalfield activists in anti-apartheid campaigning, although this fit into much longer traditions of internationalism in mining areas stretching back to at least the Spanish Civil War. Certainly these longer traditions still had an influence. For example, Paul Robeson Junior, son of the famous black American singer and activist Paul Robeson, visited South Wales in 1985 to commemorate the links developed between his father and the Welsh miners fifty years previously. This connection, he argued, symbolised more than anything the 'unity of the coloured peoples and working peoples the world over' (*Valleys Star* 1985). While Herod (2010:25) has argued that labour geography needs to look beyond 'unionized workers' to 'develop a wider conception of working-class people as geographical agents', there is also a need to recognise where trade unionists have operated outside the boundaries of what is usually considered labour politics. This is not to argue that all miners were anti-racist by 1984, or indeed afterwards. Mukhtar Dar of the Asian Youth Movement in Yorkshire, for instance, recalled visiting miners in solidarity during the 1984-5 strike: 'when we arrived there [...] one of the miners turned round and said, "what the hell are these "Pakis" doing here?"' (Ramamurthy 2013:77-8). Nor was there an absence of homophobia or sexism. There was, however, at least an activist minority within the coalfields involved in making diverse political connections in the 1970s.

This history of diverse solidarities in the 1970s can have a significant impact on the way we think

about the relationships between mining areas and women, black, and lesbian and gay activists from London and elsewhere in 1984-5. First, it points to the need to situate it as a longer term project not to by-pass class politics but to reshape the labour movement so that it was more fully representative of the working class. Second, it suggests that a minority of coalfield activists were beginning to engage with some of these issues before the strike. The journalist Gary Younge (2009) writing about the 1984-5 strike described how he could 'still recall the conversations of Nottingham miners as they adjusted their worldviews – or at least their language – to the arrival of lesbian and gay, black and feminist support groups'. The transformative experiences of that year are crucial, the solidarity relations allowing people to 'think unthinkable things, to embrace impossible ideas, to overcome the most entrenched of stereotypical notions and cautions' (Douglass 2010:484). Yet some people in the coalfields had already begun to make such connections and as a result actively sought diverse alliances during the 1984-5 strike (Francis 2015:110–111). Younge's characterisation leaves coalfield activists as fairly passive and points towards forms of solidarity that travel in one direction. Taking account of the longer trajectories of activism unsettles this view and offers a more complex and reciprocal sense of relationships of solidarity.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued centrally in this article for a greater attention to the temporalities of solidarity. While it is possible to see solidarity as a simultaneously reciprocal relationship (Brown and Yaffe 2014:35), understanding solidarity between diverse places as more than singular events requires attention to its development over time. A culture of solidarity, however uneven and contested, was actively constructed in particular sites and spaces during the long 1970s. This historicizing of the development of solidarity can also help us think differently about the significant issues Tomanev (2013) raises in his defence of parochialism. It suggests that the predominance of local or broader attachments is not ahistorical but depends on the specific conjuncture. The political and economic upheavals of this period was the context in which significant relationships of solidarity could be developed across diverse groups and places. Moreover, I have pointed to ways in which the memorialisation of such struggles sought to embed these solidarities in coalfield identities, an example of the 'relational construction of militant particularisms' (Featherstone 2005).

Activists attempted to create and enforce norms of behaviour within the labour movement, most

obviously 'the basic principle of the trade union movement – thou shalt not cross a picket line' (Scargill 1984). A more nuanced sense of labour agency, therefore, does not only involve re-asserting constraints (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011) but also being attentive to the development over time of particular cultures, both within and between workplaces, in which labour activists operate. Of course such principles were only ever unevenly abided by, but they were certainly important for example in the successful miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974. In the aftermath of the failure of the 1984-5 strike, one British newspaper article suggested such injunctions were 'ancient rubrics' appealing to 'instinctive loyalties' (Harper and Wintour 1984). Rather than being instinctive, however, I have argued that cultures of solidarity within and between workplaces had to be constructed by labour activists. The solidarity of the 1984-5 miners' strike is unimaginable without the activism of the previous fifteen years. Conversely, the defeat of the strike and the limitations of the support movement highlighted the increasing weaknesses of such a culture. This erosion of solidarity can be explained at least in part by high levels of unemployment particularly in areas with traditionally strong labour organisation, new legal restrictions on trade unions, the increasingly belligerent policing of industrial disputes, disillusionment with the 1974-79 Labour government, and popular antipathy to the alleged power of trade unions. In such a context, the extent of solidarity is arguably more notable than its absences.

Agency does not only concern the relationship between labour and capital. I have highlighted ways in which those often excluded from 'the labour movement' sought to broaden class politics through solidarity. Rather than seeing post-68 liberation movements as distinct from, or even destructive of, class politics, I emphasised ways in which they interacted and overlapped with the labour movement, a relationship that could be difficult but nevertheless productive. This generative aspect to solidarity (Featherstone 2012:9) is elided by understandings that attempt to make 'deference' a key component (Gould 2007:157). More useful is a conception of solidarity as at least potentially a mutual relationship. This mutuality, the way it is constructed and the way it is productive of new relationships between diverse places and groups of people, becomes clearer with a dynamic sense of temporality. Attending to the intersecting temporalities and spatialities of solidarity impacts both on how we conceptualize such relationships, and politically how we seek to construct cultures of mutual solidarity now and in the future.

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