**Abstract**

From novels to plays, musicals to films, the cultural history of the 1984–5 UK miners’ strike is one of contestation, claim, and counter-claim. In contrast to this extensive range of popular representations of male experiences of the conflict, writings by the female strike supporters whose actions also authored the conflict have received comparatively little academic attention. Instead, the post-strike period has been marred by the neglect and negation of female strike supporters’ literature. This chapter argues that writings authored by female strike supporters during the dispute deserve to be added to the many existing representations of the conflict. Offering new perspectives on history as well as a significant outlet for the frustrations and pressures endured during 1984–5 and after, the act of writing and the use of dialect provided women from mining communities with a voice in a cultural climate that demanded their silence. Examining the writings produced by these women during 1984–5, this chapter considers the new understandings of, and perspectives on, the 1984–5 UK miners’ strike that their manuscript works offer twenty-first century readers.

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Under-Mining the Meaning

Women’s Dialect Poetry and the 1984–5 UK Miners’ Strike

Katy Shaw

From novels to plays, musicals to films, the cultural history of the 1984–5 UK miners’ strike[[1]](#endnote-1) is one of contestation, claim, and counter-claim. In contrast to this extensive range of popular representations of male experiences of the conflict, writings by the female strike supporters whose actions also authored the conflict have received little academic attention. Instead, the post-strike period has been marred by the neglect and negation of female strike supporters’ literature. This chapter argues that writings authored by female strike supporters during the dispute deserve to be added to the many existing representations of the conflict. Offering new perspectives on history as well as a significant outlet for the frustrations and pressures endured during 1984–5 and after, the act of writing and the use of dialect provided women from mining communities with a voice in a cultural climate that demanded their silence. Examining the writings produced by these women during 1984–5, this chapter considers the new understandings of, and perspectives on, the 1984–5 UK miners’ strike that their manuscript works offer twenty-first century readers.

During 1984–5, speech, oral performance, poetry and song rose to contest statistics, government policies, and media reports as valid modes of documenting and communicating historical events. The re-emergence of these forms can be seen as an attempt by female strike supporters to redress dominant representations and challenge the traditional forms in which history is recorded and propounded. Like the writings of the Chartists, these women’s writings are “inextricably linked to political challenge” and share similar qualities of “energy, industry, honesty, sincerity, earnestness [and] threat” (Maidment 288). Their poems illuminate culture as an arena for the wider struggles of labour history, a space in which workers can contest and confront dominant narratives. In a situation of conflict such as the 1984–5 UK miners’ strike, the very act of picking up a pen became an expression of cultural resistance. Any effective analysis of female strike supporters’ poems must therefore acknowledge not only the content, medium, and articulation of discourses, but the fact that these works were written at all. In their authoring of the 1984–5 conflict, female strike supporters refused to submit to the historical silence of their class, the marginalization of “unofficial” discourses, and traditional perceptions of the forms in which history could be certified.

Instead, working within the modes available to them, female strike supporters chose to contest artificial creative boundaries, re-thinking and re-presenting rather than submitting to the silence imposed by competing narrative discourses. Their writings illustrate the cultural power of discourse, both within and between literatures. Each poem offers new networks of dialogue, widening histories of this conflict to include the perspectives of the defeated. Their writings can be read as the cultural expression of a people, the capturing of a previously blank space in which marginalized voices can articulate and engage in dialogic competitive exchange through the poetic form. As a result, female strike supporters’ poetry is offered by this chapter not as an escape from the politics and problems of its period, but as an exercise in confrontational resistance, an act of re-writing the 1984–5 UK coal dispute in practice.

Dialect Writings

The employment of dialect[[2]](#endnote-2) played an important part in the struggle to write the strike, allowing strikers to turn to the past in an attempt to reinforce their identity and traditions and to further their understanding of the dispute through the employment of alternative discourses. Across female strike supporters’ poetry, dialect is employed as a means of engagement with dominant historical narratives. Dialect is intentionally and effectively articulated, not only to foreground the pride of a region and its people, but also to establish a sense of possession, both geographically and historically. Dialect writing represents a different way of seeing the world, a symbolic bond between individual and collective, past and present, region and nation. In their poems, distinct dialects from Northumberland to Nottinghamshire are raised as verified discourses of equal worth to the “official” discourses of standard English, polit-speak, and media assertion. In this way, dialect becomes a further form of discourse between competing languages as part of a wider battle to author the strike. The articulation of situated discourses of dialect firmly places these women’s poems in a competitive exchange with the external, impersonal reality exemplified by standard English and the seemingly objective language of history.

Engaging with personal interpretations of the dispute, as well as acknowledging and addressing alternative, competing discourses, this chapter highlights the ways in which poetry written by women during the 1984–5 dispute articulates diverse dialogic poetic encounters. Interacting with history, economics, politics, social change, and competing cultural representations of the strike period—“the messiness of daily life” in Great Britain during 1984-5 and after—this poetry employs worldly registers to contest, re-think, and re-write a multi-vocal literary history of contemporary conflict (Bakhtin 2004, 331). As a direct result of a deliberate engagement with opposing representative discourses of hope and defiance, dialect and discord, female strike supporters’ writings offer a unique documentation of tensions between, and sometimes within, the combative conversations of historical record.

Although the 1984–5 UK miners’ strike came to represent the culmination of many significant issues, it is important not to lose sight of its linguistic roots. Demonstrating a wider concern with the role of literature in the history of consciousness, poetry authored by female strike supporters during the coal dispute highlights the power of language to shape reality. Language, widely recognized as an important element of identity, was used to label striking miners, to define their actions and to encourage a prophecy of submission and alienation. Language also played a key role in the failure of negotiations between the UK government’s National Coal Board (NCB) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), one of the biggest unions in the country. During the strike, the leaders of both groups (Ian MacGregor, government-appointed lead at the NCB, and Arthur Scargill, the democratically elected leader of the NUM) made statements concerning the significance of language to winning the dispute. One aide recalls that during discussions MacGregor in particular

seemed to have convinced himself that a mere form of words could be agreed with Scargill that would satisfy all sides on the issue of pit closures. Well-thumbed copies of *Roget’s Thesaurus* were used to find the magic formula that would end the strike.

(Taylor 296)

Over the course of the strike, words became victim to subjugation, manipulation, and misinterpretation, while the problem of “charged” terms such as “scab,” “picket,” and “pig” became the epicentre of a legal storm concerning the ownership, employment, and power of language in situations of conflict.

As front-line reports from this war of words, female strike supporters’ poems trace the subtle ways in which language became a battleground. Throughout their writings, a system of language, a way of understanding, is dismantled and contested to reveal the word as an active and influential social phenomenon, one able to enact, as well as represent, conflict. Embedded in numerous competing and often uncontrollable interpretations, language emerges from their poems as a central issue—one permeated at every level by the dispute it seeks to articulate. During the 1984–5 miners’ strike, there emerged a “great wariness over potentially flammable statements,” a marked fear regarding the power of language to make or break the coal dispute (Wilsher 130). As a result of the wide and contested variety of meanings embedded in the linguistic sign, language was not immune from the conflict but was influenced by adaptations and reappropriations of conflicting meanings. In this way it is possible to view language as an effective means of comprehending the machinations and mechanics of the 1984–5 miners’ strike.

Female strike supporters’ poetry displays an embryonic awareness of the two-fold dialogicity of language, of an established discourse operating at both micro and macro levels of exchange. Throughout their writings, language is offered as both internally and externally dialogic. In the words of Voloshinov, not a single word is “uninhabited by the other’s voice,” uniquely spoken or non-dialogic (Voloshinov 1926, 231–2). This internal and external dialogicity of the word can pose a profound problem since

for the poet, language is actually totally saturated with living intonations; it is completely contaminated by rudimentary social evaluations and orientations. [. . .] The artist receives no word in linguistically virginal form. The word is already impregnated by the practical situations and the poetic contexts in which he has encountered it.

(Voloshinov 1926, 231)

The poet is therefore forced to shape a language that is inescapably part of an existing dialogue on a variety of subjects, a language established in an existing discourse or, as Bakhtin terms it, an “encrustation of meanings” (Bakhtin 2004, 432).[[3]](#endnote-3)

Through literature, female strike supporters do not attempt to overcome this problem but acknowledge its influential role in their own employment of language to author the dispute. Their writings encourage us to recognize that in situations of conflict, as Matthews argues, “the medium of language, the idiom, is a part of the problem, not the unproblematic means of resolution” (189). In authoring their experiences of the dispute, these women, like Todorov, recognize that “all discourse is in discourse with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates. A single voice can make itself heard only by blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place” (Todorov x). As a result, their poetry “blends” variously inscribed associations of language, acknowledging the unquestionable presence of the past in new articulations.

Profoundly plural in both form and content, their dialect poetry centrapetalizes (in)famous words and images, destabilizing power and authority as part of a wider challenge to the monologic authoring of conflict. As Holquist highlights, the way in which these dialect writings mediate tensions between the need for communicative stability and an increasing desire to contest languages of, and in, conflict, breaks down accepted signs, revealing the chaos of competing interpretations at their core (Holquist quoted in Bakhtin 2004, xix). As a result of this flexibilization of language, the word becomes a window to alternative worlds of meaning. In their writings from 1984–5, women suggest that the poetic form is more than capable of articulating dialogized representations of conflict. Offering the reader a “consciously constructed hybrid of languages,” their poetry enters into an interactive world of competing realities (Holquist quoted in Bakhtin 2004 xxix). Through this world, strikers highlight a diversity of perspectives, meanings, and interpretations. In their writings, far from being a sign no one argues with, the word is permeated by conflict as both a symptom and cause of instability and uncertainty, power, and powerlessness.

Pickets

Three distinct terms—“picket,” “scab,” and “pig”—[[4]](#endnote-4)came to represent this battle to master the power of language during 1984–5. Dynamic and social, as well as context dependent, these words must be understood against the backdrop of their historical usage which is itself fraught with tensions, contradictions, and opposing views. When read and understood in the context of the 1984–5 UK miners’ strike, these words evidence past and present associations, expectations, and applications. Situating these terms in historically and contemporarily motivated usage, the background provided by strikers’ poetry functions to enhance meaning, transporting the reader to a heightened awareness of the word as a multi-layered and deeply subjective tool, employed with social, political, and economic motivations.

As Raymond Williams points out, “law and order,” a term which itself became a “keyword” during the miners’ strike, actually marked the unnatural combination of “what should be two quite different words and concepts” (Williams 125). Strikers and strike supporters were, on the whole, law-abiding people and for many the coal dispute was their first encounter with the law. This may go some way in explaining the reactions to the policing of the strike recorded by poetry authored by women during the dispute. Female strikers’ poetry suggests that the behaviour of the police degenerated over the course of the conflict until “they had become as bad as all the scabs” (Details l.13). The sheer weight of police numbers combined with a vindictive mentality led strikers to actively re-brand the force as the “thick blue line” (Details l.6). Throughout their poems, women express shock and bewilderment at the level and extent of violence used against them by individuals paid to protect their communities. Some female writers even describe the police force as a form of authorized terror, exercising a disproportionate magnitude of violence in comparison to the nature of picket line protests:

Just see the truncheons fly

“Brutality? Oh no, not us”

The uniformed thugs cry.

(Details ll.9–10)

Far from being the innocent enforcers of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s rule, police officers are presented as willing tormenters, manipulating the law to suit their own grievances. These vicious vendettas are even said to spill over into the domestic sphere where

No-one dares open the door in fear

of the police.

(L. Armitage ll.13–4)

The claim that police officers viewed attacks on strikers as a game is independently reiterated by a host of writers (“police used the pickets’ heads as football practice” (Pat Davison 1985a, l.16)). In women’s poetry from the strike, the police are presented as a threatening and authoritative body, determined to physically break the strike movement and destroy the power of collective protest. In an attempt to counter this onslaught, female strike supporters set about re-defining the nature, role, and image of the police through their writings.

As a dominant group, the police force enjoyed the ability to exercise power over the meaning of the word sign. However, as language users, women possessed an equally potent counter-power of protest against this directed reappropriation. Sensing that forces of authority would seek to reduce the linguistic tools necessary to articulate conflict—uniaccentualizing language to its narrowest possible terms—female strike supporters set about disputing linguistic meaning through their writings. The resulting clash between authoritative reduction and unrestricted definition produced a multi-accentual linguistic dispute both reflective of and contributive to the strike itself. From derogatory labels to verbal assaults, reappropriations of meaning and rewritings of reputation were symptomatic of, and in some cases created, profound ideological effects. In their poetry, the police are variously castigated as “Law Men,” “Zulus,” “Beat Boys,” or “Maggie’s Boot Boys” (Vout).

Manipulating a variety of pseudonyms, often within a single poem, female writers attempt to destabilize the power of this official body, reassigning image and rejecting imposed authority. Satire forms an essential weapon as part of this battle to master the language of conflict. Employing contemporary examples of police actions, female striker supporters utilize the poetic form to reveal the “truth” behind the projected image of the British police officer. Their poems suggest that the police were inconsistent and unfair in their handling of the coal dispute, actively inviting negative representations from strikers. The petty nature of police tactics forms the central subject of several works:

The coppers burned down our huts

How childish can you get

But that’s the level they stooped to

The boys we call the “Met.”

(Pat Davison 1985a, ll.5–8)[[5]](#endnote-5)

This poem “exposes” the police as sexist and racist, a force working against powers of liberty and freedoms of speech. Through its satirical stance and destabilization of linguistic identity, the poem (re)presents the police as passively following the command of their superiors regardless of the ideological or moral issues involved. These “uniformed masters of thuggery” (“Zulus on The Line” in Coventry Miners’ Support Group 1985, 83, l.10) created long-standing tensions between mining communities and the police force, forever altering the image of the police in the hearts and minds of striking communities. This deterioration in relations led to increasing polarization as the local police officer was transformed into part of the ideological apparatus, an arm of state control intent on instilling fear and oppression in picketing strikers.

Picketing played an important role in maintaining solidarity during 1984–5, providing the space and opportunity to vocalize thoughts and feelings, perspectives on developments, and hopes for the future. Picketing also helped to develop the literary culture of the strike, allowing male and female strikers to meet, exchange ideas, and write together. Through their writings, female striker supporters highlight the potential of language to label or actively construct a misleading or false image of pickets and the picketing experience. During the strike 11,312 people were arrested, many of these as a direct result of picket line protests (Renolds 2), and picketing miners were demonized by sections of the government and media. In her memoirs, Margaret Thatcher recalls that “on holiday in Switzerland and Austria [. . .] I sometimes thought that at the end of the day I would look out of the window and see a couple of Yorkshire miners striding down the Swiss slopes” (Thatcher 362) while Ian MacGregor refers to the picket line actions of the 1972/4 strikers at Saltley Gate as “riots” in his memoir (MacGregor 14).

The necessity of combating labelling through the mass picket is foregrounded by female strikers’ poetry. These writings suggest that the picket line was a point of conflict and communication, enabling strikers to articulate the language of the unheard in a space saturated by potential listeners. Finding support and strength to combat or negotiate the labels applied to their picket line protests, women counter-articulate through the written word. “Picket’s Prayer” is representative of this need for both reassurance and fortification of spirit in confronting the abasing power of the word on the picket line:

Preserve my sense of humour

When denied and abused

Let me not be degraded when

Like animals we’re used

Give me the strength to act

As my convictions bid me do

And let my every action

So be influenced by you

I’m only asking for the right

To work, for me and mine

So, Lord, be close beside me

When I’m on the picket line

(Kull 1985, ll.17–28)

Of central concern to this writer is the need for divine blessing of picket line actions—actions they know will be manipulated and castigated by the representational power of authority. Consequently, the poem sets out the principles of the dispute in an attempt to justify the necessity of this work, foregrounding the fear and hostility created by directed language during periods of conflict.

Over the course of the strike, the image of the flying picket[[6]](#endnote-6) came to haunt both the British public and their Prime Minister. Implicit in this haunting was a history of power relations based upon a politically charged Conservative position that sought to degrade and destroy the mass picket. Although picketing had proved a very successful method of defiance in past coal disputes, the criminalization of the mass picket in the months leading up to 1984 had devastating consequences for the strike movement, allowing the government to report picket line protests as “riots” of dumb violence. Removing the voices of pickets, these laws effectively contributed to a programme of dehumanization, extracting logic and transforming the picket line into a symbol of the irrational and Neanderthal thrashes of a dying industry. This stereotyping was endorsed by the Prime Minister (“I wondered whether there was any limit to the savagery of which these people were capable” (Thatcher 371)) but was also echoed in the highest ranks of the Labour movement (Neil Kinnock at the Labour Party Conference in 1984 described picketing violence as “the violence of despair [. . .] of long-term unemployment—loneliness, decay, ugliness” (Thatcher 367)).

Female strikers’ poetry questions these images of picketing, using dialect to juxtapose real-life experiences against competing representations offered by the media and government. Educating the reader in the motives and aims of their movement, they use poetry to challenge linguistic assimilation, foregrounding dialect as a unique marker of identity and belonging:

Ah’m a picket

A Yorkshire picket

’Appen some on you ’ave seen me on TV

Ah’m a picket

A Yorkshire picket

Do you all believe exactly what you see?

Do you see a load of hooligans?

A ruthless, mindless mob?

A band of villains, out to break the law?

Or do you see a union, just out to save the jobs

Of the men they think its worth the sufferin’ for?

(Gittins 8, ll.1–11)

The rhetorical structure of this direct address distinguishes the language of authority from the perceived “truth” of the speaker. Defining and reasserting the good reputation of the picket, this confessional, yet assertive, piece appears confident in the power of dialect to pursue truth through logical debate.

Using poetry as a means of exploring the false allegations levelled at them by many sections of society, female strikers use their work to counter representations of pickets as extremists, instead offering positive examples of honest men and women fighting to maintain their way of life:

I tried to walk the middle road

“Sweet reason” was my cry

I said I was a Moderate

Extremist? No, not I.

I’ll grant my roots are working class

But, segregation’s sin

How did I earn the label

“The Enemy Within”?

(Gittins 15, ll.1–8)

This poem argues that labels imposed on picketing strikers enjoy the potential to encourage socially limiting, prophetic roles. The female writer argues that, in this battle of perception, labels are applied by those with power to define representations of the powerless. The title of the poem—“Libeled”—is itself suggestive of the potential of social labelling. Employing the poetic form, strikers write back against the directed violence of a word used with the sole intention of injuring reputation and defaming an industry and its workers.

A distinct combination of language and violence is foremost in representations of picket line encounters. Female strike supporters use poetry to report the physical crushing of protests (“people trodden, bent and broken”, Kull 1985, l.7) with policemen often literally walking over strikers to get scabs through picket lines. The vulnerability and powerlessness of the picket is significant given a prior emphasis on the powerful masculinity of the mining profession. Robbing pickets of their dignity and displaying a lack of compassion for the issues and individuals concerned, female strike supporters’ writings comment on the lack of humanity shown by the police during the coal dispute. Using poetry to actively reposition conflicting collectives, female strike supporters challenge linguistic associations to offer an alternative presentation of language as reflective of, and contributive to, police/picket confrontations during 1984–5.

Scabs

During the 1984–5 UK miners’ strike the right to use language became a legal issue. Although words such as “scab” were part and parcel of strikers’ language—the word was first used in this context in 1792—it was banned on picket lines in 1984. Several people were actually arrested for using the word “scab” although, as one woman recalls in *Here We Go—Women’s* *Memories of the 1984–5 Strike*, a judge overturned the case, stating, “This word is not abusive, it is part of the English language, and you are allowed to use it” (Salt 56). This struggle for ownership became a symbol of the growing power of language during 1984–5. Women’s dialect poetry addresses the issue of “scabs” both in the context of the coal dispute and the way in which “scabs” were seen as the deserters of the mining profession as a whole. Those who scabbed during the strike did not just betray their fellow workers, they committed themselves to the label of life-long traitors and were regularly victimized (“the streets will never be quiet for them, someone is always whispering, children shout abuse. They will never allow him to forget: never. Peace, anonymity and a new beginning can only be sought elsewhere”, Thornton 27). As one anonymous poem entitled “Scab” chillingly forewarns, “it is impossible to forget what they have done to us” (l.13).

Mining communities were intimate social structures in which everybody knew everyone else and, as a result, they took scabbing very personally. For an occupation in which all men were “brothers” and people looked out for one another in the mine on a daily basis, the thought of one man betraying another and putting his livelihood in jeopardy was unacceptable. As a result, strikers were willing to try any tactic to stop men going back to work in the pits, with some even encouraging attacks on scabs as a deterrent. Women were only too aware of the benefits being offered to convince men to return to work and often used their writings to belittle these temptations. In “Song For A Scab,” Karen Kull satirically adopts the persuasive language of relief offered by the government’s NCB:

Go back to work lads, there’s a big pay out if you do

Never mind what the others say

We’ll take it anyway

Go back to work lads, the NCB will look after you.

(Kull 1984, ll.1–4)

This poem personifies Thatcherite individualism, encouraging miners to think of their own welfare at the expense of fellow strikers. These poetic appeals accentuated popular images of scabs as “blind slaves of the Iron Lady” (Vout, l.9), a mindless minority of minions undermining the collective strike movement. However, the government believed scabs, or potential scabs, were in the majority. The belief that a few rogue strikers were intimidating those miners wanting to return to work led to calls for a figure of encouragement for scabbing miners.

Dialect writings also function to accentuate the synchronic meaning of some of the strike’s most frequently disputed terminology. The variety of speech communities operating concurrently throughout 1984–5 further problematized the status and employment of words such as “scab.” In “To A Former Friend,” Jean Gittins reclaims the developing terminology of the strike and unites this with dialect to produce a powerful system of linguistic reference:

Aye lad—a thowt a knew yer—an a nivver thow’d a’d see

The day when tha’d go thro’ them gates—and turn thi back on me.

The lines an’ lines o’ bobbies—tried ter keep us all i’ place

But as the bus rushed by us all—a recognised yer face.

Ave worked wi’ you for all these years—a thowt you were mi mate

Ave watched yer back while workin’-now a watch it thro’ the gate.

Wiv shared us jobs, wi’ve shared us snap, wi’ve shared us soap i’t bath

But there’ll bi no more sharing—in the bitter aftermath.

’Cos Coal Board bowt yer heart an’ soul—wi’t promised bonus pay

It’s all ’Con’—’Cos’t brass is what thi’ owed us anyway.

I ’ope yer think its worth it—’cos this strike ’as got to end

An’ tha mun look ther them th’as joined

When next tha needs a friend.

(Gittins 13)

The emotional register of this piece is one of marked sadness and betrayal rather than anger and hatred. This sentiment is reinforced by a poetic structure organized around contrasts between past and present and a frequently punctuated emphatic rhyme scheme. The use of regional language constructs the poem as a genuine emotional confession, expressed in such a way that it implies an implicit understanding of dialect and cultural terms. The extent of this shared illusion is indicative of a desire to connect with a knowing audience as a source of shared knowledge and experience. Accentuated by the employment of dialect, the determination of the speaker enhances the effects of the strike on this individual, yet representative, relationship.

Although many female strike supporters use their writings to confront scabs and wider issues of professional kinship, others employ poetry to draw attention to the limitations of language in such a stark situation:

With hearts full of hate we despise you

By your actions you cannot be men

The feelings of loathing too hard to express

On paper, with this simple pen.

(Pat Davison 1985b, ll.21–4)

Exposed to physical expressions of anger on a daily basis, artistic expression did not always provide complete satisfaction. Unable to mediate tensions between their personal involvement in the dispute and the need for reflection and distance, many women chose to write in character to distance themselves from the views of scabs expressed by their work. In the anonymous “Thi Say,” Jean Gittins uses the persona of a young child struggling to grasp the family division and fractured lives caused by scabbing. Although tempered by the comic innocence of its speaker, the poem presents a bleak reality of loss and division:

But I can’t talk to our Uncle Charlie any more

It seems ’is legs ’ave gone all black[[7]](#endnote-7)

An’ ’ee ’as got a sore

Mi Gran sez Uncle Charlie ’as betrayed “is kith an” kin

’Ees not a son of ’ers no more

since ’ees been goin’ in

(Gittins 14, ll.17–22)

The qualities of allegiance inherent to this operative dialect would suggest incendiary motivations. The vulnerability of the striker at the mercy of a manipulative linguistic power is expressed through a pronounced devotion to a regionally specific language system that values memories and unity over short-term gain. Throughout female strike supporters’ poems, dialect is presented as more than a simple, provincial idiom. The poetic form and dialect writing are established as powerful means of countering the individualistic practice of scabbing, asserting a potent collective identity through a unified belief in the power of language to claim conflict.

Claiming Conflict

Contemporary readers approach female strike supporters’ poetry with an understanding of the coal dispute already “overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, on the contrary, by the ‘light’ of alien words that have already been spoken about it” (Bakhtin 2004, 276). In 1984–5, female strike supporters approached words and images in a similar fashion, aware of the plethora of meanings and ideas already attached to their material. It is this awareness that makes their writings distinct and their language both the subject and object of conflict, accurately articulating the “dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of the strike itself” (Bakhtin 2004, 276).

In each poem, the word is indelibly marked with implicit power relations. Each internal “voice” contained by the word-unit is drenched in implicit histories of power and powerlessness, and the written word is used to enact an intense heteroglossic confrontation between languages associated with different social and economic classes. Far from evidencing the “monologic steadfastness” considered characteristic of the poetic form by Bakhtin’s early work, female strike supporters’ writings engage in a profoundly open dialogue through their contestation of language as a stable, fixed, or received entity (Bakhtin 2004, 286). As well as allowing the author to enter into dialogue through the poetic form, language functions in this literature as a symbol of dialogue itself, a sign of the numerous interactive meanings woven together by a single word.

In female strike supporters’ poetry, the process of assigning meaning is never straight-forward. These women harness dialect to draw attention to their subjective manipulation of language and use of motivated terminology, illustrating a conscious engagement in a much broader history of dissent. Rather than bowing to authorial direction, their words highlight “the internally dialogic quality of discourse” and are steeped in implicit value judgements (Bakhtin 2004, 401). As Bakhtin asserts, each “discourse has its own selfish and biased proprietor; there are no words with meanings shared by all, no words ‘belonging to no one.’” The relationship between the writer and language is transitive, “is always [. . .] in a state of movement and oscillation that is more or less alive” (Bakhtin 2004, 302).

Demonstrating this awareness, female strike supporters author using both physical and intonational “quotation marks,” offering sideways glances to other histories, stories, and perspectives. They navigate “this complex play of light and shadow” by employing contentious terms in a state of conscious awareness (Bakhtin 2004, 277). The language in operation throughout their work is resultantly “heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socioideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, all given bodily form” (Bakhtin 2004, 291). This multitude of meanings attributed to words and images at various stages in history—and in various situations within the same period of history—can correlate, conflict, or pervert one another when released into the interpretative consciousness of the writer or reader, functioning to illuminate or obliterate authorial intention.

Disorientation between meanings and images—past and present, controllable and uncontrollable—establishes the word as a motivated sign, empowered by the individual and collective associations of writer and reader in an emotionally, socially, and politically charged exchange. While Voloshinov describes the word as a bridge linking two communicating partners (Voloshinov 1973, 86), this simple relationship is exploded by poetry from the 1984–5 UK miners’ strike. Through their use of dialect and the poetic form, female strike supporters challenge this communicative framework, alternatively positing the word as a crossroads, a sign representing the intersection of a variety of meanings and images, consciously or unconsciously embedded, which the reader must actively negotiate on the much longer, and more complicated, road to interpretation.

Throughout 1984–5, female strike supporters engaged with languages vulnerable to the tensions of conflict, extending their protests beyond the picket line to the written line. Rather than employing words to plant their proverbial flag of definition in historical record, they used language self-consciously, aware that their own poetic ventures sit alongside competing and conflicting interactive attempts to author the coal dispute. The word is not a “claimed” territory, stable and assured in its singular assertion of perspective. Instead, it emerges as a site of contestation to internally reinforce dialogic exchanges, articulating competing interpretations in a series of multi-vocal discourses. Drawing attention to “the internal dialogism of the word,” their writings show how language both articulated and contributed to the 1984–5 conflict (Bakhtin 2004, 280). Through distinctly dialogic representation, women’s use of dialect pulls apart the paranoid stability of power in celebration of the history and plurality of experience embodied by the word. Challenging the unitary drives of poetic discourse, female strike supporters’ poetry contests the capacity of words to name and claim the dispute, demanding a multi-layered reading of language both in and of conflict.

Notes

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1. The 1984–5 UK miners’ strike began as a dual battle of revenge and replication as both factions, fuelled by memories of their 1972/4 struggles, sought to rectify or revive past results. The ascension to power of the left in the National Union of Minerworkers (NUM) signalled by the election of Arthur Scargill in 1982 changed the rules of the game on the union side. Their new leader attempted to centralize power, to encourage industrial confrontation, and to teach his members to view the National Coal Board (NCB) as the agent of a malicious government. The arrival of Ian MacGregor at the NCB impacted on the government’s engagement in the dispute, signalling an immediate intention to strengthen the hand of management against the power of the unions. Social and political changes during the 1980s—including high unemployment, anti-trade union legislation, tight right-wing control of the press, Cold War hysteria, the political mobilization of the police, and the Labour Party’s shift to the right—gave the stark warning that economic Thatcherism was here to stay and would not brook resistance. “New realists” conspired to compound this idea, arguing that the only option was to submit and accept privatization, anti-union laws, and the onslaught of neoliberalism. These movements encouraged the British population to accept passively the right of the Thatcher government to manage society—an assumption that effectively steamrollered the advances made by the UK’s working classes over the previous two centuries. The ensuing year-long conflict which NUM leader Arthur Scargill dubbed “a social and industrial Battle of Britain” led to the wholesale destruction of the nationalized coal industry, the erosion of industrial relations and the extinction of a way of life. At the end of the year-long 1984–5 miners’ strike, the core issue—that of the Conservatives’ “right to manage” their people, industries, and country in whatever way, and for whatever purpose, they saw fit—had been settled unequivocally in the government’s favour. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For the purposes of this chapter, “dialect” is taken to mean a form of language that is spoken in a specific regional area. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Although Bakhtin is perhaps better known for his writings about prose, in his later writings, Bakhtin acknowledged that the genre-specificity of this dialogism theory was limiting. Indeed, it is possible to argue that, as a result of Bakhtin’s own ambiguous approach to the poetic form, an approach that altered over the course of his writings, the application of his theoretical approach to the study of poetry is both a valid and useful exercise. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Picket” is a word used in the UK to refer to a person or group of people who stand outside a workplace or other venue as a protest or to try to persuade others not to enter during a strike. “Scab” is a dialect word used to refer to a person who works despite an ongoing strike and becomes a strike-breaker. In various areas of the UK, the words “blackleg” and “knobstick” were also used to denote a person undertaking similar activity. “Pig” is a British slang term for a police officer. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The word “Met” is a slang term for the Metropolitan Police, the police force dedicated to serving the Greater London area. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The term “flying picket” refers to a worker who travels to support workers who are on strike at another place of work. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The word “black” here is used as an abbreviation for “blackleg,” a dialect term used to describe a person who acts against the interests of a trade union by continuing to work during a strike or by taking over a striker’s job. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)