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THE BEGINNINGS

Lesbians and gay men gave generously to an impromptu collection for the miners at our Pride March in June 1984. After the march, a meeting was held at the University of London Union with speakers from South Wales NUM. The response they received was so enthusiastic that another meeting was called the following week to set up a lesbian and gay miners support group, and thus LGSM was formed.

The new group began meeting weekly at Gay's the Word bookshop to organise collections and publicity. LGSM contacted Neath, Dulais & Swansea Valleys Miners Support Group who sent a representative, Dave Donovan, to speak to the group. As a result, the two groups were twinned and most of LGSM's collections were sent to striking miners and families for the duration of the strike.

Publicity for the group in Capital Gay led to a mixed response. The membership of the group swelled but letters came in denouncing the group's support as naive. The miners were portrayed as homophobic and sexist bigots who would take our money and desert us as soon as the strike ended. LGSM's position on this was very clear. The group recognised that homophobia, sexism and racism existed within the mining communities as they do throughout society, but that prejudice is the result of ignorance, and so our involvement in the mining communities would allow us to challenge this ignorance in an environment of comradeship and support. Equally, the attacks on the mining communities by the government and their agents were very much the same as those to which the lesbian and gay communities are constantly subject. It was thus very important to point out both to the mining and our own communities that we face a common enemy, and that our solidarity can eventually destroy that enemy.

Our task was made very much easier by the determination of the people of the mining communities. LGSM's critics appear to have been completely ignorant of what was happening in those communities, whose very existence was suddenly under threat. Women were organising in thousands, discovering strengths and talents many had never imagined they possessed, and challenging and overthrowing the views of many men that their role in the strike should be limited to running soup kitchens.

As it happened, the people of the South Wales mining communities were more than ready to meet and learn about the experiences of lesbians and gay men. And we were more than willing to offer our support, admiration and friendship.

COMPOSITION

One of the amazing things about LGSM was its composition. Here was a group which managed to survive a year with as motley a collection of assortments as you'd pick up anywhere. We had communists and anarchists, feminists and trotskyists, liberals and labourites, machos and minis, all crowding into the upstairs of the Fallen Angel pub week after week. The class composition of the group was unusual too in that although there were some middle class people involved, many were working class. We were not always united (understatement) but the common aim of wishing to support mining communities as an open lesbian and gay group meant that we had to move away from incestuous sectarianism.

In two areas the group found it impossible to overcome its majority: the fact of its whiteness and maleness. The group was open to everybody but in reality Black people and most women who came to the group felt unable to stay. There was much fierce discussion around questions of autonomy. Some were opposed and felt people should remain in the group fighting racism and sexism, but the group basically functioned around the task of collecting money for the mining communities during the strike. We were a single issue group.

LESBIANS AGAINST PIT CLOSURES (LAPC)

After several months, LAPC was formed. LGSM kept their original title as lesbians still attended the group. Some people in the group, women as well as men, argued against autonomy but this made little sense because how would LGSM have formed if there was no need or no concept of autonomous groupings having a valid role to play in the arena of left wing politics?

DULAIS

It was great, it was marvellous. Here were lesbians and gay men building relations in mining communities. Right wing lesbians and gay men had often sneered at us: "You're hated by the working class. I won't support the miners because they're anti-gay." LGSM showed the potential for change through involvement. In Dulais we were unconditionally welcomed, taken into people's homes, entertained, fed (by people who themselves had little to eat), and given warm beds to sleep in. The gossip and the booze and the dancing flowed. After our first visit we heard that everyone wanted "the gays" to return. People in Dulais were fascinated by who slept with whom and perplexed by vegetarians. Mining communities are meat eaters!

As personal relations developed, friendships formed. We went to Dulais, people from Dulais came to London and stayed in our homes. There were many moments of absolute joy as we made personal-political connections in a miners' welfare club, on a dance floor, or in a Dulais front room. The turbulence which led to changed perceptions was in itself revolutionary - the chances of an isolated lesbian or gay man in a mining community being able to live with more ease and more pride must be greater now.

It can only be in times of great turbulence (not peace) that the social relations which separate radical heterosexuals from radical lesbians and gay men may be overturned.

LGSM's ACHIEVEMENTS

LGSM's achievements were considerable and were much talked about, both at home and abroad. Over £20,000 was raised, £12,000 of it coming from collections alone. The Pits & Perverts benefit netted £5,000 while two jumble sales brought in over £500. A commemorative badge was struck and LGSM T-shirts were printed, both of which have proved to be popular sellers. A mystery donor and special events - such as a St. Patrick's Day party and several benefit play readings - also contributed to the total.

Besides raising money, LGSM publicised the Miners' cause far and wide through the weekly collections, articles in papers and magazines and a well-attended conference in the spring of 1985. In particular, largely through the columns of Capital Gay, LGSM kept the debate and issues alive in the lesbian and gay community. International contacts were struck up as well with articles appearing in papers in Australia, Italy, Canada, the USA, Ireland, France and East Germany.

LGSM wasn't just a political grouping either. It succeeded well on a social level too, bringing together a diverse bunch of people for almost a year. Many enduring friendships were made which have enabled LGSM's history to be recorded. This leaflet, the video and the exhibition of photographs will ensure that the spirit of LGSM lives on.

THE PITS & PERVERTS BALL

The masses arrived at this concert held at the Electric Ballroom, Camden Town. A great title for a packed event and a phenomenal atmosphere building throughout the acts until the double climax with the appearance of the speakers and Bronski Beat (with Jimi Somerville then). Two women and a man spoke on behalf of the mining communities. Yes, they wanted more money for "frozen chickens" at Christmas and money for more food & clothes, but the speakers also communicated their own developments in understanding the oppression that lesbians and gay men experience. Connections were being made. One speaker said, "you have worn our badge with pride and we will wear yours with pride too." And they did, and still do. The cheers were as deafening for the speakers as they were for the pop stars. This politics was fun.

FEBRUARY 24th

Hundreds of thousands of people converged on London on February 24th, 1985 to participate in a huge demonstration of support and celebration as the strike approached its first anniversary. For many of us, it was our first meeting with so many of the people we'd been collecting for over the previous months.

The march moved off peacefully towards the rally in Trafalgar Square. At this late stage in the strike, the press was desperately trying to downplay the strength of support for the miners. The police happily obliged them on this occasion by blocking the march in Whitehall while Trafalgar Square was still only half full. Snatch squads waded into the crowd and dragged off miners to Horse Guards Parade where they were severely beaten. All exits from Whitehall were then cut off and mounted police in riot gear rode through the crowd waving truncheons and causing injury and panic.

What had started as a celebration thus ended in frustration and anger. The police had brought to London the brutal tactics they'd been using on picket lines for the previous year in an attempt to stifle our so-called right of expression. It showed us that when they lose the arguments, the Tories and the police are always ready to rely on the rule of force.

LESBIAN & GAY PRIDE DAY, 1985

LGSM's endeavours bore fruit in the most triumphant and exhilarating manner on Lesbian & Gay Pride Day, Saturday June 29th, 1985. A large contingent of men, women and children from Dulais came to London for the day, bringing their NUM banners with them. The Big Red Band was on hand to play rousing socialist songs.

Because of the wish of some members of the Pride organising committee to keep the day 'non-political' we were not sure of the welcome we would receive. In fact, on the day, we were asked to head the march and ours became the largest section as people flocked behind our banners.'

At Jubilee Gardens, on the South Bank of the Thames, where the Pride celebrations took place, LGSM had a stall. We sold badges, T-shirts and NUM mementoes and we displayed an earlier version of the exhibition. Later in the day, Siân James from Dulais spoke to the assembled thousands, moving many to tears when she declared: "Since my involvement with lesbians and gay men during the strike, I know that if any of my children come to me and say 'I'm lesbian' or 'I'm gay', I'll understand."

For us, Pride was the culmination of all we had worked for. That famous promise made at the Pits & Perverts Ball echoed in our minds: "you have worn our badge with pride and we will wear yours with pride too."

PERSONAL ACCOUNT - Steve Browning

Being involved in LGSM had me doing things previously confined to my worst nightmares: chairing meetings, jangling buckets outside pubs in the middle of the night, loitering on the streets of Blackpool at 7am, hitching along Italian motorways, visiting funfairs....and surviving them all.

Fortunately, some people's achievements were more momentous than mine, but none more so than those of the wonderful people of the South Wales mining communities whose strength and determination inspired ours.

PERSONAL ACCOUNT - Stephanie Chambers

The majority of the people involved in LGSM were men. Many lesbians found their minority position within the group intimidating and some of the women left the group to organise a separate support group. They formed a group called Lesbians Against Pit Closures (LAPC) which drew in other lesbians in the struggle. LAPC and LGSM organised separately but came together to share resources on many occasions, one of which was the Women's Weekend early in 1985:

"We spent the entire weekend together, miners wives and other women from the mining community staying in our homes, swapping stories of our experiences in the miners' struggle. We organised a women only social on the Saturday evening and had such a laugh! We talked about how attitudes had changed towards childcare, domestic work, our sexuality and relationships. Our lives have changed as women; we are now intervening in local, national and international struggles."

Friendships between the women from Dulais and women in London were made and old friendships strengthened. But the realities of the divisions between lesbians and gay men were reflected in LGSM. It is as important for us to break down these barriers within our community as it is to challenge sexism in society as a whole.

PERSONAL ACCOUNT - Nigel Young

LGSM was magnificent. It woke me up. Drew me back into political struggle with a whoosh, brought me into contact with new and old friends, made me laugh a lot, think. It regenerated me. My personal and political life became more integrated. I rushed here, organised there, spoke in public again, enjoyed argument and gossip (I always will)! The group made the connection between gay liberation and socialism come alive - I thought that dream died in the seventies. I loved the group, it was my political romance.

This leaflet was produced to accompany the launch of LGSM's video and photo exhibition. It was written by Steve Browning, Colin Richardson and Nigel Young, 3 members of the LGSM Press Group, and with a contribution from Stephanie Chambers. It is the product of their memories, rather than an official history, and is intended to give a brief background to LGSM and some of the key events that occurred during its year of existence.

The LGSM Video and the LGSM Photo Exhibition are available for hire. Contact:

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