

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3652>



Reviews

Dear Love of Comrades: The politics of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Wednesday 8 October 2014

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The film *Pride* is an extraordinary thing – a Hollywood movie with an enormous budget telling a deeply political story about the most important strike in the second half of the twentieth century in Britain and the mutual solidarity between the strikers and the LGBT community which developed during the course of the dispute.

Relationships which are forged in times of political intensity like strikes when people are fighting to defend their whole communities tend to be long lasting as Ray testifies in the interview below. The film makes all the characters live – whether they are based on real individuals, composites or made up characters such as Bromley or Maureen.

The fact that LGSM was committed to bringing practical support to people who the government hoped to starve back to work was a powerful ingredient in that brew of solidarity – but so to was the increasing politicization of the communities faced with the might of not only government propaganda but also police brutality.

Virtually everyone who has seen it has found it extremely powerful; people have cried, laughed and felt the warmth of the story. The reviews have been overwhelmingly positive – and the fact that the one dissenting voice came from *The Financial Times* who use the film to attack miners' leader Arthur Scargill and back Thatcher's decimation of the mining communities is a further badge of honour.

There have been other mainstream films which have told important political stories; *Made in Dagenham* for example. That film, released in 2010, dramatized the struggle of women workers at Ford Dagenham for equal pay in 1968 – a positive turning point in British industrial history; because it led to the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1970.

Made in Dagenham was also a great movie – and has now been turned into a musical. Both films provide important opportunities for political discussion – not only amongst those people who participated in the struggles the films relate but also amongst people who have subsequently become activists and, perhaps most importantly, amongst young people.

The situation for LGBT people in Britain today is in some ways very different from that shown in the film. There have been important legal changes, and there are far more positive role models for young LGBT people.

But despite how far we have come, huge issues remain unresolved. Indeed homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying is probably more extensive in schools and colleges than 30 years ago. Suicide rates and attempted suicide rates amongst young LGBT people remain at high rates. There are many battles still to be won.

And the trade union movement suffered dramatically from the defeat of the miners' strike. Rates of unionization have fallen by more than 50% over the last 30 years and there have been very few successful strikes. Young people today have little knowledge of unions managing to defend jobs or working conditions – never mind winning improvements.

So films like *Pride* – for which leading members of LGSM were involved in advising the production company – are gold dust. I was very happy to be able to march with the recreated LGSM banner with other members of LGSM and many of the stars of the film from the Electric Ballroom in Camden, which features in the film, to the premier at the Odeon cinema round the corner.

Dear Love of Comrades: The politics of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners

Below we republish the interview between Colin Wilson of rs21 and Ray Goodspeed of LGSM which first appeared on [RS21](#)

Terry Conway

The film *Pride* tells the story of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners. It's an extraordinary and inspiring achievement for a mainstream movie. For almost a year in 1984-5, over 100,000 miners were on all-out strike. The strike was the major political issue of the day, and Thatcher's final defeat of the miners one of her greatest victories. Yet, while it ended in defeat, the strike included many extraordinary examples of solidarity – including that between Lesbians and Gay Support the Miners (LGSM) from London and the community of Onllwyn in the Dulais valley in South Wales.

Colin Wilson spoke to Ray Goodspeed, one of the founders of LGSM.

Say something about the situation of gay people in the 1980s. It's mentioned in the film that the age of consent for sex between men was 21.

For the first eight years of my life, homosexuality led to a prison sentence. My first real boyfriend was a week off his eighteenth birthday, and I was twenty-three. Now, if that had been made known to the police I could have gone to prison. He told his family and he panicked the life out of me – I was waiting for the police to knock on my door. The “pretty police” thing is barely believable now, but they used to send in the most attractive young policeman dressed in leathers. It wasn't illegal to be gay by the mid-80s, but it was illegal to ask anybody to have sex with you, particularly in public places. In terms of asking in the street, “do you fancy coming back to my place”, it had the same legal status as prostitution. It was soliciting for immoral purposes, and people would be arrested – mostly of course in cottages, public toilets. But sometimes you got a policeman leaning against the wall outside the Coleherne, which was a leather bar, and you'd say “what about it?” and he'd pull out the handcuffs.

When I was at Newcastle University, in 1980, there was a gaysoc. You had to get ten names to get funding from the student union. But none of the gaysoc members were prepared to write their names – none of them were going to give their names to the university. So the tradition was to go round all the left and liberal groups, and they would put their name down. So I was a founding member of Newcastle gaysoc when I was completely in the closet – as secretary of the Labour Club I put my name down. Then I was “oh, what have I done?”

I'd come out two years before the strike. I wrote my mother a letter, I couldn't do it face-to-face. My mum collapsed, she fainted. Fainted. I had to go and visit my mum and dad to face the music – that scene with the young lad Joe coming out in the film is very real. We had all that table-slamming and wailing stuff. In the end my mum completely came round to celebrate my being gay, dad came round as far as accepting it. Mum used to stay with me in London – on one Sunday morning she brought breakfast in bed to my two astonished flatmates, the two of them in a double bed together, pulling the bedclothes up to their necks. I remember my mum in various gay pubs completely surrounded, a middle-aged woman, by twenty-something gay men. But there were people who never spoke to their parents again. When I wrote to my mother, I actually included a paragraph saying, “I will completely understand if you never want to see me again”. The story in *Small Town Boy* by Jimmy Somerville – that was from real experience. People ran away to London. London was full of people from everywhere else who came to London to live an openly gay life.

Gay's the Word, the bookshop in the film, had been raided by customs and excise because it was selling indecent novels – not pornography but trashy novels, SM sex novels called *Cum* and so on, they were deemed indecent. The Customs and Excise actually raided Gay's the Word and took their stock away. It's inconceivable now.

In terms of work, during the strike I wasn't out at work. Can you imagine? I was working in the building works department at Islington Council. Some of my colleagues sussed out that I was gay, I didn't confirm or deny it, and they would go on and on about what fun it was going queer bashing and how all these fucking disgusting queers should be gassed, or put on an island and blown up. I would just sit in my office, typing away, listening to this. Eventually, I did come out – I was the first person in the building works department to come out, and I came out to everybody against the express instructions of my shop steward, who said I'd be killed. But I did it anyway, and I did really well – no-one cared. We had all these bizarrely frank sexual discussions with these men in the builders' yard.

I know you're very happy with the film, but of course it's fictionalised a bit, and I wanted to ask about that. How was it when you met the miners at first? It was like a meeting of two different worlds?

It absolutely was. There was curiosity and a certain wariness when the first speech was made, that was very nerve-racking – we were feeling our way.

We actually arrived very late, at one in the morning the day before – that's why we slept on Dai's floor. We had a day being shown round the castles and the countryside being told the local myths and legends, and about how important coal and the mines were. Then we turned up at the do in the evening. In the film there a frostiness when we first arrive in the hall. In fact when we arrived in the hall, after a kind of pin-drop moment, we got a round of applause. There was no question of anybody walking out.

At the end of the film, after LGSM is attacked in the press, the miners vote not to accept any more money from you. Did they do that?

That didn't happen. We didn't know until recently, but they had had all those discussions before we came down. So there were voices against us. The miners never told us but they told the scriptwriter. But the vote was won and they certainly never, ever went back on it. As the Cliff character says in the film "I don't believe the papers when they talk about us, why should I believe it when they talk about them?" The amount of opposition to us was minor. We never experienced any kind of hostility or unfriendliness at all.

The pit villages were isolated, weren't they, and that affected the attitudes of the mining communities?

Absolutely isolated. I mean, Onllwyn is – well, we couldn't find it. And it's Welsh speaking as well, just to add another level of difference – they were speaking their second language to us. They had never seen anything like us in their lives before. But what's so miraculous about it is the speed with which those barriers broke down.

We went down three or four times. It got better and better as they got to know us. What's true in the film is that they asked us any questions they wanted to – they were curious and we were very open. They did ask us "which one does the housework?" That was real.

The women from the mining communities were transformed in the strike. At the start there was a page 3 photo in the miners' union paper, but by the end they were playing a leading role.

The women and the men were both transformed but it, but particularly the women. They were going round the country speaking at meetings of hundreds of people – they had never gone much beyond the school gate or the market before. And they met people they never knew existed – not just the gay stuff, they were meeting Irish republicans, black communities – people they had never given a thought to before.

And it happened to the men as well – a lot of the men lived in London semi-permanently during the strike, they spent

Dear Love of Comrades: The politics of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners

most of their time here collecting money. And so they were socialising, chatting, going to the pub – they went to clubs with us, and sometimes collected with us. Bonds of friendship started up that way as well.

There's a point where all the people in the miners' club sing Bread and Roses – did that really happen?

Everybody thinks, oh, this is made up, this is just sentimental nonsense. Well, they didn't sing Bread and Roses. But they did just stand up and sing in that way. There's a tradition – Onllwyn had a male voice choir, and they had a tradition of female folksinging, lefty songs. A woman just used to stand on a chair and sing, and then people would join in. So it didn't happen in just that way, but that kind of singing absolutely did happen, and it was just as emotional – we did all actually cry.

Say some more about LGSM activities.

We collected at every single pub. We deliberately sought out new venues that hadn't been collected outside. The best thing about that year, why it was so funny and such fun, was that I had the best social life – you'd go clubbing, get drunk, flirt, dance and then take out a bucket outside when the night finished. So we were always doing it when we were pissed. I've fond memories of all of these pissed queens pouring out of the Black Cap and Jimmy Somerville was there, a pop star who had recently gone to number one shaking a bucket for the miners.

At every meeting, we planned all this. Some pubs let us collect inside – like the Bell in King's Cross. Some, we knew it would be a non-starter so we collected outside. These were the same pubs – they threw me out of the White Swan in Mile End for leafleting about Gay Pride. Gay Pride was condemned by the commercial gay scene. The attitude was don't make a fuss, all you martyrs are just causing trouble. It makes me laugh when all the gay pubs and clubs think they invented Pride. They only jumped on board when they could make some money out of it.

The reception from gay men was mostly positive. The film deals honestly with some of the negative reactions. "Why are you collecting for this instead of AIDS?" was a very common one. We did get people coming up to us who said, "I'm from Barnsley, I hate these bastards, that's why I live in London". Other people said, "I'm from a mining community, here's some money" – it cut both ways.

We also organised a jumble-sale-stroke-fashion-show. It was very well attended. Fantastically camp – you got all these old queens donating all their old tat. So we thought, instead of having just a jumble sale, we'll take all the campiest and silliest items and have a fashion show the night before. This was what I loved about LGSM – on the one hand many of us were serious Trots, but there was no fear of nelly camp. That was connected to the fact that it was gay-only, although you could debate that. And we had the big benefit in the Electric Ballroom. We made about five thousand pounds in one evening. There was Bronski Beat, other bands, celebrities donated things for the raffle, platinum and gold discs.

In the film, LGSM members are presented as idealistic and naive, but in fact some of you were seasoned lefties.

I'd been in the Militant for ten years – though they didn't support or even acknowledge LGSM and had a very dismissive position on gay rights. Mark was the General Secretary of the Young Communist League, the Communist Party youth organisation. Some of us, entrists in the Labour Party, met regularly as an organisation called Lesbian and Gay Young Socialists.

One of the LGYS members had a contact in the Dulais valley, a friend of a friend – we had a tenuous link to the area.

Dear Love of Comrades: The politics of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners

We didn't stick a pin in a map. We had thought about collecting for the miners, and when Mark and Mike Jackson brought buckets to Pride, we thought "we'll help with that", so the CP and the Trots came together. A meeting was called at Mark's council flat in Elephant and Castle.

Of the eleven people who started LGSM, we were all either Trotskyists, communists or very close friends of communists. But it's also true that in a very short time we sucked in people who absolutely weren't.

We got Ray and Reggie, the couple in the film who were looking for something to do together – they're still a couple now, so it worked. They were typical of a whole layer of people who had never done anything like this before. And there were some old gay libbers – people who had been active in the seventies. Nigel Young had been part of the gay contingent on the march against the Industrial Relations Act, the Tories' anti-union law, in 1972.

There had been attempts by gay lefties to join in the labour movement before – even in the 1972 miners' strike – so this wasn't the first time, it was just ludicrously more successful. So we had a wealth of experience from a layer of older people, though there were some tensions between the gay lib campaigners who had a left perspective but were gay first, and the Trots, who were Trots first.

You must have had all kinds of political discussions...

Oh, endless. I can't even begin, we haven't got the time. Endless discussions...

Productive discussions or headbanging ones?

Interesting discussions. We made two rules at the beginning of LGSM. Mark insisted on them and I think he was absolutely correct. The first was that our support for the miners was absolutely unconditional. If the miners had told us to fuck off, we wouldn't have stopped collecting. We absolutely did not do it in order to get anything back. Second, no one could say anything or vote on anything if they didn't actually collect money.

So we could have these discussions, but it all came down to: "that was very interesting but let's get back to raising money". Of course sometimes we put out political statements, or talked to the press about who we were, and there were debates about how we presented these.

There were also debates about tactics – the most obvious example was when the Tories imported coal from Poland to break the strike. Mark wouldn't allow us to condemn it. Mark, from the Communist Party perspective, wouldn't allow us to condemn the Polish coal import. It was ridiculous. He threatened to resign. He called our bluff and we didn't condemn it. A few people pushed it to a vote but they lost. We just caved in. Partly it was unprincipled and partly we just thought, "we just want to support the miners as much as we can. We're not going to stop Polish coal by talking about it. So why split up a perfectly good campaign?" Most people thought there was no point in shattering ourselves.

But the discussions never got to the level where we didn't talk to each other. We'd tear lumps off each other and then go to the pub and get drunk and start kissing or something. There were romances between "enemies". Mark was on the wrong side in that debate, but I'd have walked to China over red-hot coals for Mark Ashton. I loved him beyond words. The comradeship conquered the political disagreements.

LGSM was a gay-only group – it was the norm in the 1980s for different oppressed groups to organise separately. Did you talk about that?

Dear Love of Comrades: The politics of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners

The gay liberation people were clearly in favour of that, and so were Mark and his friends. There were all these street queens who were part of the group. They were really rough. Rough diamonds. There were some boys who had seen the wrong side of London gay life. They were taking no prisoners. Savage working class camp, really nice stuff. They all said it should be gay only.

Some of the Trots, we agonised – why should it be gay only? Anyway, we went along with it. Looking back, I think it was right. It wasn't seen as a way that you should always organise – most of us were quite happily labour activists in our own right. But I think it allowed that kind of campy, humorous, confident way of campaigning – we knew exactly what pushed the buttons of the gay community. I don't think a non-gay-only campaign would have had a glamorous fashion show and jumble sale.

But hardly anybody involved saw separate organisation as the be-all and end-all. My position since has been, that was good, because that was about taking gay people and connecting them to the labour movement. It was a halfway house. So while there were those of us who were dubious about the gay-only campaign, the whole point of it was to drag people into the labour movement – in that sense we thought it was okay.

In the film some women leave the group because it's male dominated, though Steph, the main lesbian character, stays.

In the film, Steph's the lesbian hero, and the others are rather mocked. We were massively male, which was part of the problem. Of the few women we had, not all of them went. There were a lot of plain speaking, tough, working-class gay men – they weren't always polite. The meetings were dominated by very gobby men. But I don't think there was any misogyny. And we were miffed when the women split, because we felt they had a pre-existing commitment to a women-only group.

We could have had a women's group inside LGSM, but they formed Lesbians Against Pit Closures and never came back. They chose a different pit in a different part of the country, in Nottinghamshire – they stopped coming to Dulais and were completely separated. It's a shame. But they did some good work, and who am I to say they were wrong? The gay movement at the time was shattering on male/female lines – there were separate Gay Pride and Lesbian Strength marches. This was just a reflection of that.

What political arguments did you put to people?

This goes to the heart of the political differences in LGSM. The CP approach was to talk about two communities, both under attack from the government. Gay people and miners are both attacked by the police. Good solidarity. For us on the Trot side, we talked much more about class – gays and miners were working class, if the miners lose all working class people will suffer. Most of us were trade union activists, so we were part of the labour movement in any case.

The YCL and Mark were going through their Eurocommunist phase, it was all about communities. A rainbow alliance – getting women, gay people, black people along with the working class. I always baulked at that slightly. For me it was about two parts of the same class. When I chaired a meeting in Lambeth Town Hall I said "I've never felt so proud to be gay, and I've never felt so proud to be working class." The two halves of my life came together, which I didn't think would ever happen. Mike Jackson said that going to Dulais was like coming home – going into a working class community and being so accepted. That was true of a lot of people in the campaign, and being taken to the hearts of a working-class community like that had a profound effect, because it was our own class and because of what had happened with our families.

What happened to the LGSM people afterwards?

Dear Love of Comrades: The politics of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners

A lot of people just picked up their personal lives, got jobs, fell in love, bought houses. People still have good politics, although some people's politics went downhill a bit.

I'd left Militant during the strike. I was involved in Lesbians and Gays Support the Printworkers, which wasn't as successful but was useful. I volunteered at London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard. Then Clause 28 came along and we organised Trade Unionists against Section 28, which was separate from Stop the Clause campaign – they were proto-Stonewall lobbyists, they just wanted to lobby MPs on the back stairs. We learned the lesson of LGSM, which was that you go straight to workers, you don't just lobby their leaders. We learned that if you go on the basis of solidarity to another group of workers, they will respond. I spoke to any number of union branch meetings: we contacted local branches and stewards. We made a pack that was sponsored by the CPSA, the civil servants' union, a basic guide on gay rights for ordinary shop stewards. I was in the Green Party for a while. Then after the Gulf War in 1991 I did nothing politically for about fifteen years. My batteries had run out: I'd lived on constant activism since I was fourteen. The Tories won the 1992 election and I thought, oh, to hell with this.

Now I'm active in Left Unity. I see Left Unity very much as the heir to the LGSM spirit – people coming together, not asking all these ideological questions before you join. Join first, and we'll talk about it later. Join us in action, and we'll talk about issues and thrash them out. Left Unity has excited me more than anything I've done since LGSM.

And lots of people died of AIDS, including Mark Ashton.

Mark died, yes – and some other people died. I went to a lot of funerals. Actually, if they had wanted to be schmaltzy they could have had Mark dying in the film. All the miners came back up again for his funeral. We had the banners and the band and everything. We marched to the cemetery. So if you thought the Gay Pride march in '85 was moving, you should have seen the funeral. There were miners and miners' wives sobbing. His death was like a stake in the heart, even for people who disagreed with his politics. There was something about his character – it's portrayed so well in the film.

And the people from Dulais?

We never really lost contact but it's really moving to meet them again now. Cliff has died, Hefina died. SiŃn is an MP, Dai works for the broadcast union BECTU. In the valleys, in those communities there are problems with crime, drug talking, alcoholism.

We went round for a year saying "if the miners lose, we all lose". None of us knew how true that was. We've been destroyed in the last thirty years. We're having to pick up the pieces now. It feels like the 1880s, we're back to William Morris and Keir Hardie now, we're just starting again. We're having to go back to basic lessons about trade unions and solidarity – I hope the film plays some part in that.

Back then it was impossible to be neutral – the strike polarised the whole country, you were for the miners or against. LGSM was Trots, CP members, Labour party members, drag queens, gay liberationists, people who weren't political – when I see them now I'd hug all of them. The disputes you normally get between those different people weren't important. It was very clear – all these people are on my side, and I love them.