

David Felton meets a green belt miners' support group



Hemel Hempstead: campaigners plan their fund-raising strategy. Littleton: strikers' wives sort the gifts

A group of largely middle-class professional people sit in a Commuterland basement planning their next fund-raising activity for striking miners. Over a hundred miles away the recipients play cards in a strike centre and look forward to yet another meal of beans and chips.

The fund raisers are just one example of a countrywide network of miners' support groups that have sprung up to ensure, in the words of one union slogan, that "They shall not starve". The groups, based mainly on trades councils and constituency Labour parties, have contributed several million pounds in cash, food and clothing to the miners' cause.

An alternative welfare state has emerged to make sure that the strikers are not forced back to work by economic pressures. Social security benefits are minimal because of the £16 a week deducted for the strike pay deemed to have been paid, although striking miners receive no dispute pay from the NUM. They therefore rely heavily on the support groups, particularly to fill the food parcels which are distributed in the coalfields each Friday.

In Hemel Hempstead (unemployment rate 9.2 per cent), a centre of the "high tech belt" around London, one group has adopted miners at the Littleton pit near Cannock (unemployment 20.5 per cent). Lecturers, computer programmers, social workers, and even a company director have effectively bridged the social gap during the 41-week strike. Littleton miners spend weeks in the town staying with sympathizers, making speeches and collecting money.

In return members of the group spend weekends in Huntingdon, the pit village surrounding Littleton, seeing the hardship at first hand. And hardship there undoubtedly is. The "southerners" receive a tremendous jolt when they arrive at the village, where only 250 of the 1,400

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NUM men at the pit remain on strike. There are 402 married men and women, 99 single men and 206 children reliant on the new "welfare state". Houses are cold and food is often short. Last Friday, despite the efforts of the Hemel Hempstead supporters and others in Haringey, Milton Keynes, Bedford and Borehamwood, there were not enough groceries to fill the food parcels, which should each be worth about £5.

Littleton is in the heart of the moderate Midlands coalfield, and the strikers find themselves isolated in a community deeply split by the strike. The NUM can rely on receiving no support from the local authority in Cannock because Labour councillors who form the largest group are split and the balance of power is held by four Tories, whose leader is a working miner.

The Hemel Hempstead group also has a combative relationship with its local, Tory-controlled, council which is now seeking legal opinion on whether to take action over the group's stall set up in the main shopping street every Saturday. The organizers claim it is a publicity venture which takes orders for miners' paraphernalia, while the council argues it amounts to a street collection and needs a permit, for which there is a waiting list of about 12 months.

The political infighting in Hemel Hempstead seems very distant to

Carol Griffiths, a 23-year-old mother of two who receives £24.95 to sustain her family while husband Paul remains on strike. Without the food parcel each week, however, she would find it almost impossible to manage. Last week she ran out of coal. Because the NCB is no longer giving out concessionary fuel, union officials had to approach the pit for an urgent delivery, which her husband will have to pay for when the strike ends.

Mrs Griffiths has been fighting the Department of Health and Social Security over its refusal to grant her a diet allowance so that she can buy the fresh foods needed by two-year-old Claire, who has a bowel disorder. Electricity costs £9 a week. The television works on a meter but the rental company is threatening repossession because it is not being used enough to meet the rental charge.

She had to leave the area this year because she was suffering from a nervous complaint, but found that life with her family in South Wales, who also live in a mining community, offered no respite from the tensions. She takes anti-depressant drugs, but despite all the mounting difficulties says that she is prepared to stick it out until the end of the strike: "Paul won't go back and I stand by that."

The situation of single men can often be even more desperate, as they receive no social security. Several of the Littleton strikers live

at home with parents implacably opposed to the strike. I heard of one young man virtually forced out of the house because his parents will not let him watch television. I spoke to another whose father had refused to give him money to replace a disintegrating pair of shoes.

Ted Jones, the NUM lodge secretary at Littleton, estimates that it needs about £3,000 a week to meet welfare demands, of which £900 comes from the national union. The rest has to be found by local collections and the support groups. There was not enough food last week for the parcels because the groups are now concentrating on collecting Christmas toys for miners' children.

Hemel Hempstead has raised more than £7,000 plus clothing and food, since May, about £6,000 of which has gone to Littleton with the remainder going to collieries in other parts of the Midlands. The group is adamant that its efforts are part of a political rather than a welfare effort.

David Harding, president of the trades council, says: "We don't see that there is any difference between the political aspects of the dispute and the hardship. I take the view that people who make donations for the hardship would not do so if they were resolutely opposed to the struggle of the miners." The scale of the support has surprised the group: people living in the wealthier areas have been donating clothing and helping the group meet its target of 1,000 toys for Christmas. The group raises the money through dances, raffles and jumble sales: recently £1,000 was taken at a meeting addressed by Tony Benn.

In Huntingdon Ted Jones is clear that without the help of the support groups the resistance to return to work would have crumbled. Hemel Hempstead supporters would see that as a vindication of their actions and a political achievement of the kind they could not otherwise hope for in the Tory south of England.

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