

Bursting the Bubble? How Durham University was involved in the Miners' Strike of 1984-85

Students are, and always have been, an inherently political group. But, the students of Durham are infamous for their existence within a privileged bubble,¹ so how did they, and their lecturers and support staff, react when faced directly with issues from outside their collegiate screen from the outside world? With a student newspaper often heralded as one of the best, and in conversation with contemporaneous members of the University, it becomes clear that, while there was involvement and concern coming from the community within the institution, this was often on an individual basis, rarely being an official stance of an organisation or society unless it was a stance of opposition. The Miners' Strike serves as a stark reminder that yes, Durham University exists within the city of Durham, but its bubble is near impenetrable, and remains opaque and in tact in even the most pressing of political circumstances, leaving a legacy of apathy when it comes to issues at home.

It would not be inaccurate to state that, in most cases, seniority sets the precedent for political feeling within an institution, and at Durham University there was an evident lack of action from those with the most power. One law student from the time speaks of how there was not one agreed tactic for discussing the strike in his department.² The dean of the law school, for example, as far as Calland can recall, did not share any strong views on the matter, the department as a whole coming across as a Conservative force. Whilst there were some lecturers who made an effort to bring politics into the teaching space, and use their experience in the law

¹ Calland

² Calland

sector to aid the miners, broadly Calland felt that the strike was not as big of an issue in the university as it ‘should have been’, it ‘didn’t feel like it was a central political issue’.³

There is, however, a counter narrative. Some of the Durham staff did as much as they could to help the striking Miners. For example, Ray Hudson, who not only ran a weekend school for the local miners with another Durham lecturer prior to the strikes,⁴ but also worked with the National Union of Miners throughout the strike, trying to document the impacts of the strike and acting as a researcher on behalf of the mining communities of East Durham.⁵ Hudson notes that though support for the strike ‘wasn’t there at an institutional level’, some very senior members of staff (including the vice chancellor at the time) were sympathetic to the cause on a non-official level.⁶ Hudson’s father was a coal miner, thus making it almost inevitable that he would have an interest in the communities he, himself, was raised in. And this pattern can be seen amongst a large number of the examples of staff-level involvement with the miners. Basil Bunting, the Northern Arts fellow in poetry at the Universities of Durham and Northumberland from 1968 to 1970,⁷ in a letter to his daughter in November 1984, states that ‘if I were younger I think I would have been taking part in the struggle the miners seem to be losing against our awful government’,⁸ followed by repeatedly likening Thatcher to Hitler. The disappointing trend of staff involvement being not only unofficial due to an absence of an announced University stance, and only really coming from staff with ties to the area and mining that predates their involvement with the institution goes to show just how stalwart the bubble

³ Boe Williams. Interview. “Interview with Richard Calland” (15 September 2025)

⁴ Redhills email

⁵ Boe Williams. Interview. “Interview with Ray Hudson” (18 August 2025)

⁶ “Interview with Ray Hudson”

⁷ ‘Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Basil Bunting Poetry Archive’.

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⁸ ‘BB Letters to His Daughter Roudaba’

was, and not just for the student community, but the lecturers and support staff were cut off from the political situation of the city around them as well.

In terms of the students and the strike, this can be seen on two levels, individual and in the context of student organisations, the former is most evident in the discussions and letters within the student paper, *Palatinate*. Richard Calland has categorised the Durham students into three groups; those overly involved with the Student Union, the Conservative (and likely Thatcherite) “Hooray Henries”, and the apathetic.⁹ However, he seems to be part of a fourth option, the individually politically aware opposing Thatcher’s policy. He writes a strongly worded piece on the steamrolling of civil liberties that took place in the early days of the Miners’ Strike (and that continued throughout). Noting how the police appear to be ‘implementing not the rule of Law but the rule of Government’, he, as a student of Durham University shows both an understanding, and an interest, in the actions of the Miners.¹⁰

Not all students felt so strongly opposed to Thatcher’s government. Angus Cameron, another student and self-professed journalist, took issue with Calland's piece. Despite his agreement that the government was indeed self-serving over the interest of such groups as the miners, Cameron states that this is merely human nature, and Cameron was not the only disgruntled *Palatinate* reader.¹¹ After ‘seeth[ing]’ his way through Calland's piece and ‘violently disagree[ing] with the entire article’, Stephen Israel also took it upon himself to write into the paper expressing his disapproval.¹² Israel makes a point to defend the police action against the

⁹ “Interview with Richard Calland”

¹⁰ Richard Calland, “These Times”, *Palatinate*, 10 May 1984

¹¹ “Letters”, *Palatinate*, 21 June 1984

¹² *Ibid.*

miners by clarifying that secondary picketing is illegal, and that the mass picketing was inevitably going to lead to a breach of peace, so the 'police were well within the law' and not acting solely on behalf of the government.¹³ Elizabeth Carnelly then goes on to most accurately represent the centrist opinion. Condemning the violence of both sides, Carnelly states that 'students who join with either one side or the other can only prolong the dispute'. This opinion displays a political awareness, and yet plays into the apathy witnessed from the student body in a different way. Carnelly knew the extent of the issue, and yet chose a policy of hopeful arbitration which Carnelly, herself, knew it was 'probably [...] too late for'. A disconnect masquerading as mutual care for both sides of the dispute seems to be the default for a Durham student met with 'miners collecting in the street'.¹⁴ These three examples of student opinions just go to solidify the impression of knowledge without action from the student body. Despite their obvious awareness of the strike, those writing in to *Palatinate* did not either care enough to move to action, or did not feel that they had the capacity and support to get more involved in the miners' struggle.

This indifference is perfectly encapsulated by the piece claiming that 'issue of more general and lasting concern in respect to police powers' is up for debate in commons, that being the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill. While the reasoning for this statement can be followed (as this issue tackles arrest warrants and racism in the police), it is placed, unnecessarily, in direct opposition with 'violence on the picket lines [as] discussed [...] in this issue'.¹⁵ There is, therefore, and underlying implication, here, and championing of one political issue over another, highlighting this general 'apathy' for the issue of the Miners' Strike amongst the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Connolly, "The Miner's Strike [sic.]: A Middle View", *Palatinate*, 25 October 1984

¹⁵ *Palatinate*, 25 October 1984

Durham students.¹⁶ To many of those studying at Durham, the Miners' Strike was just another political event to be aware of, their proximity and ability to help seems to have rarely entered their political consciousness. As Calland says, the odd juxtaposition between local struggle and the opulence of University life left the bubble of political ignorance well and truly in place for many of the students.¹⁷

It would be inaccurate, though, to claim that *all* the interactions with the Miners' Strike were on an individual basis. The Student Union, headed by Simon Pottinger, spent much of the beginning of the 1984 academic year discussing policy towards the striking Miners.¹⁸ Pottinger was going for full solidarity with the miners, being quoted in October of 1984, saying 'there is no space for compromise, the only solution has to be complete victory for miners'.¹⁹ The Durham Student Union even sold milk to the Miners on strike at cost price, an active policy that helped the families in need.²⁰ But, as with all student politics, these policies were not immediately implemented and were subject to much pushback and procedure. The main group opposing the Student Union's proposed support was the Durham Conservative Association, who even went as far as to attempt claiming that the selling of milk at cost price was illegal, in breach of the ultra vires law.²¹ This resistance led to a defeat with a margin of around sixty votes in a Student Union General Meeting, after which there was a mass exodus of students whose interest did not extend beyond opposing support for the miners.²² This event is a prime example of the political attitude of the Durham student. Any hope of a collective policy and

¹⁶ "Interview with Richard Calland"

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Miners: Policy Unresolved", *Palatinate*, 25 October 1984

¹⁹ "Support for Miners Strike", *Palatinate*, 10 October 1984

²⁰ "Miners: Policy Unresolved"

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Miners Voted Out", *Palatinate*, 8 November 1984

group action was shot down by students with a singular mind to defeat the motion, not even staying for the rest of the General Meeting discussing a multitude of other important issues that directly affected the life of the voters. Where other university student unions raised money directly to help those in strikes, namely Glasgow University that raised £500 in 10 days,²³ Durham Student Union and its president were left to scramble under radar to aid the miners. It can even be argued that the group interest in the strike in both the cases of the Student Union and the opposition to support are driven by individual political motivation, Pottinger in the case of the SU, and influential figures on the right of University politics, such as leading figures in the Durham Conservative Association.

Even today, student and staff support for the miners and interest in their cause remains one of self-direction. Jonathan Renouf, a Doctoral student in 1987, wrote a report as a precursor to his thesis on the decline of industry in the North East, and the way the strike was an attempt to save, specifically, Murton pit.²⁴ The fact that projects like this exist follow the argument that university members did, and still do, wish to positively interact with the Miners' Strike, but this had to be done on an individual basis. This can be further seen in student attendance at the Miners' Gala this year (2025). As the event was outside of term time, any student from outside of the local area that wished to go and support the event with its theme of solidarity had to make a concerted effort to attend, and many did. One student even marched under the Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners banner, taking a more than active role in explicitly taking part in the day's proceedings.²⁵ The continued interest in the Miners' cause, even after the closure of mines in the area, shows that there is a want amongst the University community to share the

²³ "Glasgow NUM link", *Palatinate*, 22 November 1984

²⁴ Jonathan Renouf, University of Durham. Department of Geography, *Murton Miners Strike for Change*. (Durham: University of Durham, 1987)

²⁵ Boe Williams. Interview. "Interview with a Durham student". (21 September 2025)

Miners' plight, but even today, this remains an individual endeavour. There are even a number of academic publications from current and past lecturers at Durham, such as the joint work *The Shadow of the Mine* by Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson,²⁶ but these works just further play into the narrative of personal projects. Each example of present day involvement does not come from a University department or group, but rather one academic who has chosen to take part.

In conclusion, despite the overwhelming cultural shift caused by the Miners' Strike throughout the United Kingdom of the 1980s, Durham University as an institution, and broadly the organised groups within it, managed to stay apathetic in an almost apolitical bubble. Where other universities and student organisations made a concerted effort to support those on strike, many of the similar policies seen at Durham were proposed and carried out on an individual basis. For an institution positioned so centrally to the political climate of 1984 and 1985, the apathetic bubble of both staff and students alike largely remained unburst, and can even be seen to persist to the present day. Durham University as an institution had very little, if any, involvement with the Miners' Strike, leaving members of the University's community to attempt help on a personal and independent basis.

²⁶ Huw Beynon, Ray Hudson, *The Shadow of the Mine : Coal and the End of Industrial Britain* (London: Verso, 2021)

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