

Introduction

The Stop the Strip-Searches Campaign (SSSC) was initiated by the Armagh Co-ordinating Group following the March 1983 International Women's Day delegation to Belfast and Armagh jail. Some weeks after the delegation, impressions of the visit were discussed at a call-back meeting. Many women were keen to take action on the worsening conditions in the jail.

Four women on the delegation had visited women prisoners in Armagh. It emerged from the visits that the prisoners felt it was urgent for something to be done about the sudden escalation of harassment by the regime, in particular the strip-searches. 'Don't let them break you, love' (see elsewhere in pamphlet) is a woman prisoner's account of her first experience of being strip-searched in Armagh.

The Armagh prison chaplains, Fathers Faul and Murray, had already begun to protest about the strip-searches in Irish newspapers, but very little information had come out about them in Britain. The SSSC was formed with the aim of providing information on the strip-searches and to encourage people in Britain to put pressure on the government to halt the practice.

In May '83, the SSSC produced a leaflet outlining the situation in the jail. This was distributed widely amongst women's groups and on the left in England, Scotland and Wales. Women who had been on the delegation wrote articles which were published in papers including Outwrite, Spare Rib, Big Flame, Class Struggle, Anarchy and Peace News (at home), as well as in feminist and anti-imperialist papers in Holland and North America. A press release was sent out to the national press but it did not lead to any coverage.

The SSSC then initiated a mass letter-writing campaign. A factsheet on the strip-searches together with draft letters of protest to the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Prior) and the Governor of Armagh (Thomas Murtagh) were sent out to a wide range of influential people, with a request for their support. The list included MPs, MEPs, Lords, councillors, trade unionists, religious and other public figures. The pack was also sent to feminist and anti-imperialist groups and individuals.

Some of these people did write letters of protest, but overall the response was disappointingly small. Some forwarded the replies they received from the NIO to the Campaign, and these are analysed in the section, 'The Official Response'.

Kevin McNamara MP brought the issue of the strip-searches before parliament on several occasions during 1983 by asking questions about the frequency and alleged reasons for the strip-searches. The answers he received are set out in the section 'Commentary on Strip-Searching Figures'.

In July '83, the SSC met four women Labour MPs—Jo Richardson, Joan Maynard, Clare Short and Harriet Harman. They agreed to ask parliamentary questions on the situation in Armagh, but the House went into recess soon after Jo Richardson had received one written answer.

Clare Short visited Armagh jail in August and spoke to Governor Murtagh but was not allowed to visit the women. This was despite the fact that MPs are supposed to have the right of access to any prisoner in a British jail.

The SSSC also wrote to Hans Jorgen Haagerup, the MEP leading the European enquiry into the political situation in Northern Ireland. We asked him to take the situation in Armagh into account in his investigations, but he did not reply to us.

Since the summer of '83, motions condemning the strip-searches in Armagh have been passed at various conferences. The women's section of Brent East Labour Party tried to send a motion on this to the Labour Party Conference, but was unsuccessful. In November, Camden Women's Committee passed a report condemning the strip-searches; this was later also passed by the full Council Meeting. Islington and Lewisham Women's Committees have now passed similar reports.

The strip-search issue has also been taken up by women's groups and Women and Ireland groups in many parts of England and Scotland. Irish solidarity groups in England and Scotland also gave support, as did the H-Block/Armagh Committees in Amsterdam and New Zealand and the Ireland Committee, Holland.

A petition calling for an end to the strip-searches was signed by people all over the country.

The SSSC made contact with Women in Prison, a group campaigning for the rights of women prisoners. This helped us to compare the treatment of women in Armagh with that of women in other British prisons. A more thorough comparison would be useful.

During the eight months from February-September '83, the monthly average number of strip-searches per woman strip-searched dropped gradually from 8 to 3½. It was felt that this might be partly due to the public protest that had occurred. However, the number of strip-searches per month on those women most frequently strip-searched remained fairly constant. The SSSC realised that although the prison authorities might have decided to reduce the overall frequency of strip-searches for a period, it was likely to increase again if and when the protest died down.

Frustration was felt with the difficulties of knowing what was going on inside the prison, as well as with the uncertainty as to whether a letter-writing campaign could have any long-term effect. In September '83 those women in

the SSSC who felt it was worth continuing the campaign along these lines, decided to do so within the Armagh Co-ordinating Group, of which several were already members.

Since then our activities have included giving talks on the situation in Armagh, urging the Labour Women's Committees to take up the issue and producing this pamphlet. At time of going to press, we are preparing for the presentation of the petition condemning the strip-searches in March. Joan Maynard MP has agreed to hand it in to Downing Street after a press conference in the House of Commons.

After the 1984 International Women's Day delegation to Armagh, the Armagh Co-ordinating Group will consider a future course for the campaign. If you are interested in contributing, or want to form your own campaigning group, see the article 'What you can do'.

Armagh Co-ordinating Group
February 1984

As we go to press (February 22, '83), it has been reported in the national press that 18 women are on hunger strike at Durham high-security prison in the north of England. These women are protesting at the appalling conditions in which they are being held. We wish them success.