

## The Grimethorpe Miners

For those who have eyes to see there are lots of valuable lessons to be learned from the strike of the Grimethorpe miners against the efforts of the National Coal Board and the Union to make them do more work. The mines were nationalised only on January 1st, 1947, but within a few months the determined resistance of a few hundred men backed by thousands of other Yorkshire miners who struck in sympathy, showed the hollowness of the claim that Nationalisation and Labour Governments can solve the problems of the workers. When Nationalisation took place Labour Party supporters welcomed it as a new era of industrial peace and the death of private profit, but socialists warned the workers not to be deceived into thinking that wage-slavery in the mines would be altered in any way. It has not taken long to reveal in the clearest fashion that the difference between private and state capitalism is not worth the workers' votes.

In May of this year the National Union of Mineworkers made an agreement with the National Coal Board for a change-over to a five-day week, without loss of pay, on the understanding that the Union would co-operate with the employers, the Coal Board, to "promote every possible and reasonable means of ensuring that the maximum output of coal is produced". The Union specifically pledged itself to co-operate with the management in persuading the workers to accept re-assessments of work which would mean in many cases cutting down the number of men required for a particular piece of work. The Union undertook that it would "not countenance any restriction of effort by workmen resulting in failure to perform the work so assessed". (The full agreement was published in the *Ministry of Labour Gazette*, May, 1947).

The dangers of an agreement which binds the union to help the employers bring pressure on its own members are obvious. If the members of the NUM understood and approved of this the responsibility rests on them and not only on their Communist General Secretary and the other officials who signed the agreement. There is, however, much evidence to show that the members went into it without realising what they were accepting. This may be partly due to a temporary lack of contact between the members and the executive, resulting from the recent changeover from a federation of county associations to a centralised national union. In addition it is certainly due to the close tie-up between the national officials of the Union and the Government, which results in the former imagining that it is their job to give orders to their members rather than take them. The comment of the *Manchester Guardian* is to the point:

"The Union leaders took a great risk in giving the Government the assurances they did without being sure that the miners were really willing to attend regularly and to do a full shift's work. It will not do to put the blame on a minority of 'bad' miners. A little slacking has to be taken into account in any calculation. Either the union officials misjudged the temper of their men or they did not do as much as they knew to be necessary to explain what the five-day week meant. This failure is not surprising. The NUM's constant concern with the handling of national policy in Downing Street and Whitehall has left its leaders with too little time for the details of affairs in the pits . . . The Union will have to make a bold effort now to regain the full confidence of the miners. Like the National Coal Board it will not do that unless it can restore the close

touch with local problems that has to some extent been lost by its conversion to a centralised organisation." (*Manchester Guardian*, 9/9/47).

The amazing situation developed of the miners' officials denouncing their own members in terms that the former coal owners could not have exceeded for arrogance.

Mr Lawther, President of the Union, told the strikers they were "acting as criminals at this time of the nation's peril". He actually invited the Coal Board to prosecute: "Let them issue summonses against these men, no matter how many there may be. I would say that even though there were 100,000 on strike." (*Daily Mail*, 29/8/47).

The Communist General secretary, Mr Arthur Horner, was nearly as bad. In a statement to the Press (*Daily Herald*, 28/8/47) Mr Horner said that the strikers "must be regarded as an alien force and treated as an enemy of the true interests of the majority of the miners of this country". What some of the miners think of these swollen-headed gentlemen may be judged by the words "Burn Will Lawther" painted up at the entrance to the Grimethorpe colliery and by the comment made by a miner to a representative of the *Star* (9/9/47):

"Mr Horner seems to have forgotten that he is our servant and is acting as if he were our lord and master. We pay him to fight our battles and not to fight against us."

This miner was right and the sooner all workers take steps to bring their would-be dictators into line the better for the trade union movement.

One aspect of this must not be forgotten. Years ago the Communist Party popularised the slogan "Watch Your Leaders". If ever it was necessary to do so it certainly is now when Communists like Mr Horner have reached positions of eminence in the unions. A letter published by the *Daily Worker* (13/9/47) pointed out how closely Horner's phrases resembled those for which the Communists used to denounce Mr J. H. Thomas. Not that the idea behind the slogan is a sound one. Against the Communist idea that what the workers need is "better leaders" (who all turn out to be just like their predecessors) the Socialist urges the need to get rid of leadership.

The bitter experience of the Grimethorpe miners brings out clearly that nationalisation has changed nothing, except perhaps that it is harder for men to fight the National Coal Board than it was to fight the local mine-owners. The following statement by a *Daily Herald* reporter was published on August 30th:

"The real point of their grievance seems to be that in the general reorganisation of work underground involved by the change, men may be put on to other jobs at which they earn less money. A joint committee of miner's delegates and representatives of the Coal Board decided on the increased stint. The Grimethorpe men complain now that they had no representatives on this joint committee, and that the decision to increase the stint came as a bombshell . . . They also complain that the divisional Coal Board officials are the same officials they had before the Government took over."

Those foolish optimists who fancied that the bitterness of the class struggle, if not the struggle itself, disappears when the employer is the State might note the remarks of a *Daily Mirror* representative. He wrote (6/9/47):

"How they hate the Divisional Officers of the Board! Big salaries, big cars, big offices, big titles-but they don't go down the mines."

One miner remarked "What do these ----- know about it? They couldn't get themselves enough coal to boil an egg."

The National Coal Board's attitude to the workers was expressed by one of the Board's spokesmen:

"This is the test case of our authority. It is the first real test we have had, and at such an early stage in our career we cannot afford to have our prestige shaken by withdrawing the extra stint order." (*Evening Standard*, 4/9/47).

The miners have indeed exchanged one hard master for another.

Another illusion cherished by Labourites is that when an industry is nationalised human aspects and the well-being of the workers no longer have to take second place to financial considerations. Since the mines have got to pay their way, including the necessity of meeting the cost of compensating the former owners, it is obvious that this cannot be. It remained for the Communist General Secretary of the Miners' Union to dot the i's and cross the t's of this fact. In his statement denouncing unofficial strikes and urging increased production he disclosed that at a secret session of miner's delegates in July he told them that "the Coal Board is at the present time losing money in a very serious fashion." (*Daily Herald*, 28/8/47). There was a time when miners' officials would have told employers that the finance of the industry was their affair or would, as in 1926, have told the owners to go to the Conservative Government for a subsidy if they couldn't manage otherwise. Now, under a Labour Government, this Communist conveys the employing Board's lament to the workers, and instead of demanding a five-day week unconditionally urges the workers in effect to work harder to put the Board's finances on a profitable basis.

Whatever else may come out of the Grimethorpe strike it should teach some miners at least not to put their trust in Nationalisation, or in Labour administration of capitalism, or in leaders, Communists included.

(October 1947)