

## The Miner's Strike—Why

Why did 120,000 miners join what has become the longest, bitterest and most controversial strike in the British coal industry since 1926? Clearly, it is no answer to say that they are motivated by subversive political aims or that they have all been hoodwinked by nasty Arthur Scargill and the NUM leaders. We can read this kind of facile substitute for an explanation in the propaganda press.

Economics under capitalism are concerned first and foremost with price and profit. Production is regarded as "uneconomic" when investment of capital shows little or no prospect of leading to profit for the investor. Being "uneconomic" is not at all the same as being "useless". For example, dairy farming is currently "uneconomic" within the EEC countries because more milk is produced than can be sold profitably. However, milk is desperately needed by the 40,000 children who, according to UNICEF, die of starvation or malnutrition-caused diseases every single day. So, when the economic experts say that miners are producing too much coal, this excess relates to profit rather than need. Similarly, when they say that investment in certain miners is "uneconomic" this does not mean there is not plenty of coal in them, but that capital investment in mining such coal would be unprofitable.

Politicians like Thatcher have never forgiven the NUM for the success of their last strike. Responding to the feelings of many capitalists, her government wants to weaken the power of the miners. A leaked Cabinet Minute of 1979 explained that

A nuclear programme would have the advantage of removing a substantial proportion of electricity from disruption by miners and transport workers.

Economists are not paid to think about the devastation of the old mining communities which pit closures cause: destroying long-established ways of life does not appear on their balance sheets. Economists are not paid to register the harsh facts that more than half of the men attempting suicide are unemployed and that the rate of successful suicides in Britain has shot up during the present recession. Nor are they paid to bother themselves about the old workers who will die this winter because they are too poor to switch on a heater. Electricity output has been reduced because there is much less market demand for it by domestic consumers, while the non-recognition of real human demand leads to the totally unnecessary social disease of hypothermia. But none of these factors is of economic significance under capitalism: let communities be converted into industrial wastelands, let thousands of useful and energetic miners be forced into idleness, let thousands be cold for lack of coal-based heating.

There was once a time when miners, in the company of many other workers, were easily persuaded that the solution to the problems of the profit system was nationalisation of industry. If only the mines were owned and controlled by the government rather than by private capitalists, it was asserted, the miners would have little to worry about. Forty years ago Will Lawther, the President of the Mineworkers' Federation of Great Britain (the predecessor to the NUM), asked readers to imagine what could be achieved through nationalisation:

It would win the complete confidence of the miners and their families. Generations of suspicion and hatred would be wiped out, and an entirely new attitude developed towards the coal industry . . . Only through public ownership can you really plan the effective use of Britain's coal resources, plan production on the basis of modernisation or mechanisation, and bring about complete unity between your export and domestic coalfields . . . (Foreword to Britain's Coal by Margot Heinemann, 1944).

Lawther goes on to predict that nationalisation would "enormously improve output and make use even of old coalfields that are looked upon as being worked out" and that "only the nationalisation of the mines can win the confidence of the miners". One can forgive miners for having been taken in by these hopes for capitalism at the time, even if—it must be added—the Socialist Party of Great Britain was then pointing out to those who would listen that nationalisation offered no solution to the workers. But now, after decades of experience of state capitalism in action, it is politically inane for workers to imagine that nationalised industries are in any way immune from the economic laws of capitalism. The NCB, as the state employer, is just as exploitative and antagonistic to the workers' interests as were the old mine owners.

The second myth which needs to be dispelled is that the state—the government, the law, the judges, the police commanders—is neutral. The state must be the political defender of the ruling class. When thousands of miners are stopped from picketing, when hundreds of miners are beaten by the police and when the funds of the South Wales NUM are stolen by the courts, it is clear that the state exists to reinforce the needs of capital. It would make no difference if the Labour Party was running the state instead of the Tories. That is why, when the Labour Party was in office between 1964 and 1970, they closed down 48 pits and made over 50,000 miners unemployed in the South Wales region alone.

In the first three months of the strike one miner was arrested every twenty minutes—3,282 arrests in all. Over 80 per cent of these arrests were for "breach of the peace" or "obstruction". Obviously the government has instructed the police to use tough tactics in dealing with the strikers. The well-known television picture of a police officer beating a defenceless striker with a truncheon is but one of numerous examples of police brutality in a battle initiated by the state. But as ordinary workers, paid to do an unpleasant job, it is not the police workers on the picket lines who are to be blamed: the real culprits are the legally respectable and physically secure boot-boys who pull the strings of the state.

The NCB has increased its importation of cheap Polish coal which is one of the factors weakening the effects of the British miners' strike. The NUM now has an official picket outside the Polish Embassy, calling on the Polish bosses to suspend imports in order to strengthen the effects of the British strike. But when Polish miners attempted to set up an independent union of their own the President of the NUM (writing in his personal capacity) argued that such action constituted "sabotage" and that the Polish miners should be loyal to their state bosses. The capitalists, who not for the first time are benefiting from the tactic of Divide and Rule, must be laughing all the way to the bank as they import cheap coal from their "Communist" enemies. Reproduced below is the full text of a resolution published by the underground Solidarity union in the

Warsaw region, first published in their illegal journal, CDN. It shows that the writers and supporters of this Polish resolution are thinking along internationalist lines:

For four months the British miners have been on strike against a programme of mass closures of mines for economic reasons. The miners are threatened with unemployment. The government has rejected compromise solutions and has resorted to severe police methods against the strikers. Thousands of miners have been arrested; hundreds have been hospitalised and one has been killed.

The government of the Polish People's Republic, despite hypocritical condemnations of the activities of the British police in the columns of the regime press and by the regime's pseudo-trade unionists, is profiting from the export of coal to Britain. It sells dirt cheap coal which has been mined in scandalously neglected working conditions and with reckless condemnation of the labour force and the coalfield. The slave labour of the Polish miner serves to break the resistance of the British miner.

British miners! The true sentiments of Polish trade unionists towards the authorities of the Polish People's Republic and their practices was shown in the recent electoral farce which was boycotted by the workers. In the prevailing conditions of terror, the Polish workers' movement is at present not in a position to undertake protest actions. But you may be certain that as you have supported and are supporting our struggle, so we are in solidarity with you. We strongly oppose every case where force is used against workers struggling for their rights and interests. (Published in CDN, Mazowsze region, 26 June, 1984).

How painful it would be for the workers who produced the above resolution to know that the President, and several other key leaders, of the NUM believe that Solidarity should not exist.

As the miners' strike has not been organised by socialists, it is not surprising that tactics have been employed with which we disagree. It is possible that the division within the NUM could have been avoided; full, democratic decision-making within the workers' movement is always the surest guarantee of strength.

But the miners' struggle has shown the importance of solidarity between workers of one county and another one country and another. The sense of common purpose and dedication which thousands of miners have shown during the strike contrasts sharply with many previous struggles in trade union history, where workers have been conned into co-operating in their rulers' interests. Let any miserable little cynic who says that workers are incapable of self-organised co-operation take a look at the tremendous achievements in communal self-help which strikers have set up.

Secondly, the strike has shown the Labour Party and its Leftist followers to be quite unable to point the miners in the direction of socialism. According to the theory, Leftists are supposed to wait for major struggles like this one in order to move in and tell the workers about the alternative to capitalism. In fact, the SWP, CP, WRP, RCP and numerous other inflatable vanguards have not produced a single leaflet between them urging the miners to transform their demands into the political aim of abolishing the wages system. As for the Labour Party, Neil Kinnock and his fellow mis-leaders have had little to offer but empty rhetoric. After all, every time the Labourites stand up in the House of Commons to tell the Tories how wicked they are, the Tories have been able to quote chapter and verse showing that previous Labour governments have run the mines in just the same way-to meet the demands of the profit system.

In any strike between robbers and robbed (with the exception of political strikes, such as when the dockers opposed immigration or the Labourites ran their phoney day of action) the Socialist Party is unequivocally on the side of the robbed. In the class war no worker and no political party can be neutral. But in expressing solidarity with workers in struggle, we point out that our sympathy and their temporary gains will be meaningless unless victory involves winning the war and not just one battle. To win the class war workers must organise as a class for the conquest of the earth and all its resources. No lesser victory is worth settling for.

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