

Britain: Scargill's cronies proclaim him honorary president for life of miners union

Chris Marsden
14 February 2002

At a special conference of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) held last month, Arthur Scargill was elected to the newly created post of honorary president. He will hold the unpaid position for 10 years.

Due to retire as union president in June this year, Scargill pushed through a rule change to create the new post. There were immediate allegations that he was seeking to cling to power in the union in order to maintain his financial position. Scargill denied this, stating, "Honorary means what it says—honorary, unpaid president of the NUM."

Things are not so clear-cut, however. His post may be honorary, but it appears that no one will replace Scargill in the post of union president. Therefore his new position is far from merely titular and he effectively remains in sole charge of the NUM as a national entity.

While Scargill is due to draw the last pay check of his £70,000 per year official salary in July, he will receive remuneration of £12,000 for presiding over the union pension funds. He will also maintain his grip over the NUM's funding of the International Energy and Miners Organisation, for which he receives an undisclosed sum as its president.

Above all, Scargill's efforts to maintain control of the NUM are bound up with political considerations. He has said that the new post will allow him to concentrate on politics, through the medium of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), which has been left without a president following the death from cancer of Scargill's deputy at the NUM, Frank Cave.

Scargill set up the SLP in 1996, following a high profile break with the Labour Party after it abandoned Clause Four of its constitution, pledging to bring the commanding heights of the economy into public ownership. His argument went as follows: Labour had been formed at the beginning of the twentieth century by the trade unions, which constituted the mass organisations of the working class. It was this connection with the trade unions that had provided Labour's character as a workers' party and a potential vehicle for the establishment of socialism. However, Labour had turned its back on that heritage, leaving the trade unions without representation in parliament and the working class without a political voice. Consequently the unions, which Scargill maintained still function as the basic organisation of the working class, must

disaffiliate from the Labour Party and form a new socialist party.

Scargill's SLP was therefore based on a political fiction—the assertion that the trade unions provided an opposite to the rightwing lurch of New Labour. Far from opposing Blair, the union leaders pioneered his pro-business agenda through advocating no-strike deals and the creation of tri-partite bodies between unions, management and government. Indeed Labour's right-wing evolution was not despite of, but *because* of the political origins cited so uncritically by Scargill.

Vehemently opposed to the Marxist programme of social revolution, the petty bourgeois politicians that dominated the early Labour Party and shaped its political physiognomy took the perspective of trade unionism rather than socialism as their starting point. While Labour professed socialism as a final goal, it did not set out to fundamentally challenge the existing social order. Just as the trade unions confined the working class to a piecemeal struggle to secure concessions from the employers, so too would Labour seek limited social reforms within parliament that did not threaten the continued functioning of the bourgeois state and the survival of the profit system.

To the extent that the ruling class was desirous of securing a social and political consensus in order to ensure the continued functioning of the national economy, reformism appeared to pay dividends for the working class. The loyalty enjoyed by the Labour Party and the mass membership of the trade unions was secured as a result of the gains made by workers in the form of higher wages, better working conditions, access to free health and education provisions, etc.

However, fundamental changes within the very structures of capitalism have since rendered the programme of national reformism impotent. Today the nation no longer constitutes the basic unit of economic life. Every aspect of production, distribution and exchange is organised globally and dominated by vast transnational corporations, banks and other major concerns that owe no national allegiance. The CEOs of these commercial giants demand the elimination of social provisions, which they view as a drain on profits and drastic reductions in the cost of labour under the threat of relocation. In response national governments of every political persuasion have abandoned policies based on social consensus in favour of

measures that enrich big business at the expense of working people.

Scargill first came to prominence during the tumultuous events that gave the initial impetus to the efforts of the bourgeoisie to carry out these sweeping structural changes within the world capitalist order—the social struggles that swept through Europe and other parts of the world between 1968 and 1975. He made his name as a militant trade union leader during the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974, which played a crucial role in bringing down the Conservative government of Edward Heath.

To this day, Scargill insists that the answer to the present political dilemma facing the working class is a return to the industrial militancy of the 1970s. But what Scargill hailed as that earlier social movement's strength was in fact its Achilles heel.

Confronted with a potentially revolutionary situation, the British ruling class was able to ride the crisis by installing a Labour government. Precisely because the working class remained wedded to a reformist trade union outlook, the government of Harold Wilson was able to avert a political crisis by settling the miners pay claim. The Labour government of 1974 to 1979 provided a crucial breathing space for the capitalist class, while the Conservative Party utilised its time out of office to prepare a renewed offensive against the working class. Labour's attacks on the working class paved the way for the government of Margaret Thatcher to come to power in 1979, committed to a programme of union busting, the destruction of the welfare state and the restructuring of the British economy to meet the demands of international finance capital and the TNCs.

Scargill's other claim to leadership of the working class is his role as NUM president during the miners' strike of 1984-85. But if 1974 can be said to represent the highpoint of industrial militancy in Britain, then the year-long miners' strike was proof of its failure.

Thatcher was determined that there would be no repeat of Heath's experience. She had brought in a batch of anti-union legislation, specifically aimed at outlawing supportive action by separate unions, under the threat of sequestration. Either the unions would conform or they would be busted, she declared. In 1982, a TUC conference drew up an agreement to oppose the new laws. However, when Thatcher deliberately provoked a confrontation with the NUM no union came to the miners' aid.

It is Scargill, rather than Thatcher, who should be understood as the architect of the terrible defeat suffered by the miners. It was he who refused to politically challenge the isolation of the strike by the TUC and the Labour Party, which were opposed to any political struggle against Thatcher. Scargill did not make a call for a new socialist party until more than ten years after the strike, under conditions where his own union had been reduced to less than 6,000 members. If he had made such an appeal against the Labour leaders and their fellow travellers in the

TUC in 1984, he could have won the ear of hundreds of thousands of workers. But his over-riding concern was to preserve the dominance of the trade union bureaucracy over the working class, even if this meant sacrificing the jobs of his members.

The launch of the SLP in 1996 did not signify a change in Scargill's political priorities. His appeal was for his fellow trade union bureaucrats to distance themselves from Labour and not for a political rebellion by the working class against them. He even insisted that the union block vote be incorporated into the structures of the SLP, despite the fact that no trade union was affiliated to the new party—including the NUM.

Even today Scargill remains the only trade union leader of note to have left the Labour Party. Six years after its formation, the SLP is home to a small group of aging NUM bureaucrats and the political detritus from the extreme fringes of the old Stalinist and Maoist parties. Its claim to represent a resurgence of political trade unionism rests entirely on the persona of Scargill as NUM President, hence his desperate efforts to secure this title in an honorary form following his imminent retirement.

His ability to do so hardly adds weight to his claims. As one might expect, he won the position by utilising the block vote, with his cronies casting thousands of votes on his behalf. But most of the votes cast represented retired or even deceased members, or their relatives, or workers from other industries who have availed themselves of the legal services of the NUM in order to take forward compensation cases. At the time of the 1984-85 miners strike there were some 180,000 members of the NUM. By the last audit two years ago, this was down to 6,000, of which estimates of actual working miners are around 4,000. Even this much reduced figure is expected to fall to between 2,000 and 3,000 in the coming months, especially with the threat that the private operator UK Coal is to close its 13 deep mines at a cost of over 6,000 jobs. But Scargill boasted a collective card vote of over 11,000!

In effect Scargill has had himself proclaimed the lifetime, unelected head of an all-but defunct organisation, in order to bolster the fortunes of a party that is similarly dead on its feet. As a consequence, he has been able to maintain the association of the SLP with the NUM, but what does this amount to? Far from proving the viability of a party based upon the trade unions, as he intends, the entire episode points to the opposite conclusion.



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