

Britain: 20 years since the year-long miners strike

Part Two

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6 March 2004

Below we are publishing the concluding part of a two-part examination of the lessons of the British miners' strike.

Scargill refuses to challenge TUC and Labour

Thus, the dominant sections of the Labour bureaucracy were utterly opposed to any mobilisation of the working class against the government. Yet the perspective of Scargill, the Labour Party's left wing and Britain's various radical groups was limited to the encouragement of a militant movement within the trade unions to pressurise Labour and the TUC into taking such a stand. What they would not contemplate was the development of any movement that threatened a political break from the bureaucracy.

This was to prove decisive in the defeat of the miners' strike. As the TUC's own official history tellingly explains: "In the early 1980s, a policy of active opposition to the anti-union laws was one at the TUC, with activists hoping to repeat the successful (though often unofficial) movement against the industrial relations act of 1971.... [A]t crucial moments some unions, in a weak position, looked to the TUC General Council to organise support action but this was never going to happen. TUC General Secretaries (Len Murray, 1973-84 and Norman Willis, 1984-93) were not going to risk the TUC directly breaking the law (however distasteful that law was)."

The strike began on March 5, 1984, and was to end on that same day a year later, though Kent miners and some in Yorkshire stayed out for a few more days in protest. The immediate spark for the strike was the announced closure of Corton Wood Colliery, but this was only the initial target of a government intent on closing all unprofitable pits and privatising those that remained. In opposition, Scargill called for the closure of pits to take place only on the grounds of exhaustion and for the preservation of a nationalised and subsidised industry.

Throughout a year of bitter struggle, the actions of the TUC and the Labour leadership were dedicated to isolating the miners and ensuring that the substantial support that existed within the working class was not mobilised against the government.

Solidarity action was mostly limited to raising money and food as the strike dragged on. (Around £60 million was raised—a testament to the strength of support for the miners' fight.) Partial and unofficial blocks on the movement of coal were imposed by railwaymen, dockers and lorry drivers, but official secondary supportive strike action was opposed by the TUC unions. Strikes by dockworkers broke out twice as a result of efforts to break their embargo on moving coal, but were speedily called off by the union leaders. And a strike by overseers known as pit deputies was called off on the basis of a rotten compromise. It should be noted that without the deputies, no pit could

work and the concerted campaign by the Tories and the police to encourage scabbing would have come to nothing.

Scargill and his supporters took an ambivalent attitude to the TUC and the Labour Party. Initially, they sought to keep them at arm's length, arguing that this would prevent them from being in a position to sell out the strike. On March 16, the NUM sent a secret letter to the TUC explicitly stating, "No request is being made by this union for the intervention or assistance of the TUC."

But Scargill's efforts to "galvanise" the labour movement by a display of mass picketing at the Orgreave Coke works near Sheffield in May and June were a disaster. It merely allowed thousands of riot police to wade into miners dressed only in jeans and t-shirts, and to make hundreds of arrests and seriously injure dozens more—including Scargill himself.

In the latter months of the strike, Scargill and the NUM were forced to repeatedly take part in negotiations with the National Coal Board set up by the TUC.

The NUM leader was in an unrivalled position from which to challenge the TUC and Labour bureaucracy, should he have chosen to do so. Had he made an explicit call to the working class to defy their leaders and come out in support of the miners, there is no doubt he would have met a powerful response. Instead, he kept his members out in an increasingly futile campaign before accepting defeat without securing a single concession from the government and the National Coal Board.

Though Scargill enjoyed considerable standing amongst the more militant sections of the working class and was viewed as a principled alternative to the likes of Labour leader Neil Kinnock, his leadership would not have remained unchallenged throughout months of terrible hardship had it not been for the crucial support he was given by the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP).

At the time, the WRP was the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), but had long since begun to abandon a revolutionary perspective in favour of a capitulation to the bureaucratic leaderships of the workers' movement.

Its adaptation to Scargill was one of the most grotesque expressions of this protracted political degeneration. The WRP's role is analysed in the ICFI statement, "How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism 1973-85":

"During a struggle that lasted for one year, the WRP never once placed a single demand on the mass political organisation of the working class—the Labour Party. It never issued a call for the

mobilisation of the working class to force the resignation of the Tory government, new elections and the return of the Labour Party to power on a socialist programme....

“For all its left-sounding rhetoric, the line of the WRP throughout the miners’ strike conveniently enabled the [WRP leader Gerry] Healy clique to avoid any conflict with its opportunist friends in the Labour Party and with the Scargill leadership of the NUM. For all the talk of a revolutionary situation, the WRP leaders consciously ruled out any criticism of Scargill—thus exposing the fact that their own call for a general strike was utterly hollow.”

The ICFI statement continues, “In the situation which existed in 1984, the central demand to bring the Tories down and return the Labourites to power on socialist policies would have had a powerful impact upon the mass movement, and created the conditions for the exposure of the Labourites. In so far as the Labourites, including and above all the Lefts, refused to support this demand and fight for it their credibility within the working class would be shattered. On the other hand, if despite the sabotage of the Social Democrats, the Tories were forced to resign (or, for that matter, attempted to remain in power in the face of mass popular opposition), a pre-revolutionary situation could have emerged in Britain....

“The campaign for a general strike could only develop in a political struggle within the working class against this objectively reactionary line. It would have entailed an uncompromising day-to-day battle against Scargill’s centrist politics, a clear analysis of the limitations of syndicalism, the exposure of Scargill’s ties to the Stalinists, and an unequivocal denunciation of his refusal to fight for the immediate bringing down of the Tories. Only along these lines could the WRP have built up within miners and the working class as a whole the **political** consciousness necessary for the general strike.”

In the final analysis, it was the refusal of the WRP to wage a principled struggle against Scargill that disarmed the many thousands of workers who looked to it for a lead, and thereby ensured the strike’s defeat.

The necessity to develop a *political consciousness*—that is, a genuine socialist consciousness—in the working class remains the essential lesson that must be drawn from the miners’ strike.

The strike was a seminal experience for a generation of workers, but it is one that has still to be digested and understood.

It is a feature of the strike that despite the suffering it caused, it generally strengthened bonds of friendship and family. Even its critics are forced to acknowledge, for example, the essential role played by women in the strike and how this challenged preconceptions in what was undoubtedly hitherto very male-dominated communities. In the strike’s aftermath, however, communities were torn apart and many families split up. This cannot be understood simply as the result of a defeat, however terrible. It suggests the personal pressures created because so few of the strike’s participants understood why they had been defeated despite their heroism and sacrifice and were able to conceive of a way forward.

Thatcher won the strike not because of any inherent strength, but because of the rottenness of her political opponents. And though it was portrayed at the time as the high point of industrial militancy, it turned out to be its last hurrah. By 1984, the old organisations of the working class were already in an advanced state of decay. And the perspective of national reformism on which they were based could no longer provide the means through which the working class could defend any of its past gains, let alone offer the means to make fresh advances.

Tony Blair and New Labour are not in that sense a break from the history of the workers’ movement, but the product of its most negative features—its ideological subordination to the bourgeoisie and the profit system.

The miners’ strike posed the necessity for the working class to break both organisationally and politically from the programme of social reformism and to develop new organisations and methods of struggle based upon the revolutionary internationalist perspective of Marxism—in opposition to which Labourism had developed.

But at the time, even the most steadfast and principled sections of miners and the working class generally believed that militant action alone would be enough to stiffen the resolve of their leaders and ensure victory. They paid a heavy price for such illusions.

At first glance, it would appear that little that was progressive emerged from the miners’ strike. Certainly, it had the effect of tightening the grip of a corrupt clique on the workers’ movement, using the defeat to proclaim the end of the class struggle in order to impose its own right-wing policies.

There is an extremely limited character to such a victory, however.

The last 20 years have seen changes of such magnitude that they have turned previous assumptions upside down. In the process, it is not merely the old perspective of social reformism that has been discredited. The alternatives offered by the right wing have been exposed in far less time. Thatcher’s “popular capitalism” proved to be a recipe for societal breakdown, and the repackaged version offered by Blair, the so-called “Third Way,” has proved to be no less disastrous.

The most discredited of political notions, however, is the idea that the Labour Party in any way represents a political alternative for working people. The ideological conquest of the old workers’ movement by overt champions of the profit system and the transformation of the Labour Party and the trade unions into adjuncts of big business are so complete that they can no longer hold the allegiance of the broad mass of the working class.

On every issue relating to its social and democratic rights, the working class today finds itself in direct confrontation with its old organisations. This found its most finished expression in the mass mobilisations against the Iraq war, where popular hostility to Blair’s pro-business agenda fed into opposition to an unprovoked and criminal attack on a defenceless country.

The class struggle is far from over. Rather, the anti-war movement indicates that in the next period it will not be confined within the old structures and must take on the character of a political rebellion against the trade union and labour bureaucracy. In preparing the ground for such a development, an examination of the central lessons of the miners’ strike is of vital importance.

Concluded



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