

Britain: 20 years since the year-long miners' strike

Part One

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Below we are publishing the first of a two-part series on the 1984-85 British miners strike. The concluding part will be published tomorrow.

The year-long miners' strike of 1984-85 was a watershed in political life in Britain. The worst single defeat suffered by the working class in the post-war period, its results continue to resonate to this day.

There has been no shortage of documentaries and articles marking the 20th anniversary. But none of these have made a serious attempt to examine the central lessons to be drawn. Generally they have fallen into one of two camps:

Firstly, there are those claiming that the defeat of the miners' strike was inevitable because theirs was a lost cause waged by yesterday's men. The argument essentially runs that the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, though at times autocratic and arrogant, represented the wave of the future. It was intent on modernising the British economy by curbing the power of the unions, which acted as a bastion of outmoded working practices that were "holding the country to ransom". Naturally one may have sympathy for the fate of individual miners, but this should be put in perspective. For what took place subsequently was a consumer boom and the development of the new economy based on deregulation and private capital which even the Labour government has now embraced. This is the view of both the pro-Conservative and pro-Labour media.

Secondly, there are those on the left of the Labour Party or in various smaller left groups who look back wistfully at the events of 1984, point to certain mistakes that were made, but essentially regard it as a "glorious" episode and a template for the class struggle in the future.

The apparent strength of the former argument is that it appears to have been confirmed by events. As the web site dedicated to Margaret Thatcher proclaims, "The year-long miners strike of 1984 is regarded as the last gasp of the old union order; since that year Britain has not experienced any major industrial conflicts."

This cannot be answered by those who refuse to seriously address the causes of a defeat that has ensured the ascendancy of right-wing political and economic nostrums for two decades and for which working people have paid such a bitter price.

For the miners themselves the impact of the strike's defeat has been devastating. There were 170 pits in the UK when the strike began, employing over 181,000 men and producing 90 million tonnes of coal. Today there are 15 pits employing around 6,500 men. Around 3,000 more are employed in surface mining. Areas once defined by their connection with mining such as Durham and Lancashire now have no pits. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has been reduced to a rump with a few thousand members who are still working in the industry.

The suffering of the miners during the strike was on a scale almost without precedent. Some 20,000 miners were injured or hospitalised, 13,000 arrested, 200 imprisoned, two were killed on picket lines, three

died digging for coal during the winter, and 966 were sacked.

The miners faced brutal attacks by the police, who utilised techniques of suppression never seen before in mainland Britain. Mounted officers charged at pickets and through the streets of mining communities. A national task force was created of heavily armoured riot police, which was used to mount military style attacks. Miners were prevented from freely moving around the country, and special courts were created to deal with the large numbers of arrests made.

A legal attack was waged against the NUM, during which there were repeated efforts to sequester its assets. Powerful business interests and elements within the state combined to organise a massive strike-breaking operation that culminated in the establishment of a scab union, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers.

What happened after the strike's defeat was worse. Once pits closed whole communities were plunged into desperate poverty. Many young people were forced to leave in search of work and, of those who stayed, reports estimate that one in three households are affected by problems of serious drug addiction.

Any regeneration efforts attempted in former mining areas have been shaped by the character of today's economy, with its domination by transnational corporations seeking access to cheap labour and extensive tax breaks. Consequently, according to the Coalfields Community organisation, "Companies are able to recruit rigorously and selectively to build up workforces of people willing to work flexibly for low wages, frequently in non-unionised workplaces. Work is often part-time and sometimes temporary when factories close soon after opening."

More generally, the defeat of the miners became the signal for the final abandonment by the trade unions and the Labour Party of any defence of the social interests of the working class. There were other strikes, of course, but nothing of equivalent magnitude. In the 1970s the highest number of days lost through industrial disputes was 29.4 million—during the "Winter of Discontent" of 1979. But the average number of days lost each year in that decade was still 12.9 million. In the 1980s the average was 7.2 million, but this figure is distorted by counting in the number of days lost as a result of the miners strike itself, with 27 million working days lost in that year alone.

During the following decade, however, the average number of working days lost each year was just 660,000, with 1998 recording the lowest ever figure of 235,000 in just 205 stoppages, compared with 1,221 in 1984.

Trade union membership is now less than seven million, compared with over 11 million in 1984. In the private sector less than 19 percent of workers belong to a union and less than one-fifth of all 18-29 year olds are union members. This drops to around 10 percent in the private sector.

Even this does not begin to address the full impact on the ability of the working class to successfully combat the employers. For the unions today

function essentially as a police force on behalf of management, as opposed to defensive organisations on behalf of their members.

Throughout Thatcher's terms in office and that of her successor John Major, the unions did nothing to oppose an unprecedented shift in wealth from the poor to the rich. And when Labour came to power in 1997 under Tony Blair, it continued Thatcher's pro-business policies with the full collaboration of the Trades Union Congress.

Within the first two years of Labour taking office, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population recorded their highest share of national income since 1988, at the height of Thatcher's rule. Income inequality today is even higher than it was under Thatcher.

As for the impact on working conditions, this can be judged from the fact that by 2002 the number of working days lost due to stress-related illness had risen to 33 million, up from 18 million in 1995, and was fully 60 times the number of days lost due to industrial action (550,000).

Thus, an examination of the miners strike is not simply an issue of historical interest, but one of contemporary significance.

The scale of Thatcher's victory in 1984 cannot be understood without reference to the years that preceded it. Indeed, the year-long strike is popularly portrayed as the outcome of a fight between two giant egos—Thatcher and NUM President Arthur Scargill—each out to finally settle a conflict that first began in 1972—which saw mass picketing organised by Scargill at Saltley Gate coke depot and the miners secure a 27 percent pay rise—and most significantly in 1974. The miners' strike of that year, at which time Scargill was NUM Yorkshire president, had forced the Conservative government of Edward Heath to pose the question "who rules the country, the government or the unions?" In the end, his government was forced to quit office and give way to a minority Labour government.

Thatcher's ascendancy into the leadership of the Conservatives was as the head of a right-wing cabal fired by the belief that Heath should have never retreated in the face of what she subsequently described as "the enemy within"—the miners and the working class. But this shift within the Tory Party was bound up with more fundamental economic and political processes.

The bringing down of the Heath government took place at a time of a systemic crisis for the capitalist class on a world scale. The years between 1968-75 saw a series of class struggles, often of revolutionary proportions, as a result of an international economic crisis epitomised by the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of dollar-gold convertibility.

The ruling class survived this tumultuous period, but profit rates continued to decline. As a result, the dominant sections of the bourgeoisie concluded that only a major offensive against the working class and the complex system of concessions embodied in the welfare state could rescue the capitalist system. Thatcher, together with President Ronald Reagan in the United States, embodied this political shift away from policies of class compromise towards direct class confrontation.

Thatcher represented the ascendancy of powerful new forces. The major corporations had sought to counteract falling rates of profit by an aggressive turn towards global investment and internationalised production. As part of this strategy they demanded the deregulation of the economies of the advanced industrial countries, the slashing of tax rates and the destruction of welfare provision. Under the banner of "rolling back the frontiers of the state," Thatcher was dedicated to such an economic and social reorganisation of Britain in order to make it globally competitive. This included the "rationalisation" (gutting) and/or privatisation of previously nationalised industries so as to slash taxes while opening key areas of the economy to corporate investors.

After 1974 the Conservatives spent five years in opposition preparing a major offensive against the working class. Just prior to Thatcher's coming into office in 1979, a report was prepared by Nicholas Ridley detailing a plan to defeat the miners in the event of another industrial conflict,

including the organisation of a "large, mobile squad of police, equipped and prepared to uphold the law against violent picketing."

Scargill also saw the early 1970s as providing the essential framework for the 1984-85 strike, but unlike Thatcher, from the standpoint of repeating what he saw as a heroic success.

Far from being the revolutionary of popular right-wing mythology, Scargill is a life-long supporter of the Stalinist Communist Party and an advocate of its national reformist programme. To the extent that he spoke of socialism, it was as a perspective for the distant future. In the meantime, what was required was the creation of a nationally regulated economy based on a mix of import controls and subsidies that would provide the basis for protecting Britain's nationalised coal industry. This was the "Plan for Coal" that he sought to commit the Labour Party and the TUC to fight for in a struggle against the Conservatives. What was demonstrated in 1984, however, was not only that the ruling class was no longer prepared to tolerate such a policy, but that there was no longer any significant constituency for such a programme within the labour bureaucracy of which he was a part.

The same processes that had given rise to Thatcherism had already undermined the Labour Party's national reformist programme. Historically, the Labour Party and the trade unions had advocated a piecemeal struggle to secure concessions from the employers and social reforms through parliament. The bureaucracy did so not out of a genuine belief that this was the eventual road to socialism, but in order to safeguard the profit system on which their privileged existence depended from revolutionary challenge by the working class. Their fundamental loyalty was always to the preservation of the bourgeois order, but they could successfully argue that this was compatible with the provision of higher wages, better working conditions and access to free health care and education.

The globalisation of production that took place from the mid-seventies and which accelerated in the 1980s had rendered this national reformist policy bankrupt. The reorganisation of every aspect of economic life—production, distribution and exchange—on an international scale was incompatible with Labour's traditional efforts to maintain a social and political consensus between the classes. Instead, the Labour government that the miners helped to bring to power in 1974 had implemented austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund and imposed wage restraint. In this way the Labour Party first gave the bourgeoisie vital breathing space to prepare a counteroffensive against the working class and then paved the way for what was to be 18 years of Conservative rule.

At no point did the TUC offer any alternative to the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and then James Callaghan. It merely demanded a slight change in course. As a result, one of the most intensive periods of industrial conflict ever—the Winter of Discontent of 1979—actually succeeded in bringing to power the most right-wing government seen to that point in Britain.

Not only did Scargill's perspective cover over the role played by Labour and the TUC in preparing the way for Thatcher, it offered no way of combating the continued shift to the right by the bureaucracy. After Thatcher had secured her second election victory in 1983, the right-wing leadership of the Labour Party had concluded that it was necessary to adapt wholesale to the new economic and political orthodoxy dictated by the bourgeoisie. For its part, the TUC, having isolated and betrayed every struggle against the government, abandoned even its formal opposition to the anti-union laws.

To be continued





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