

# Britain: The significance of the Scargill/Kinnock row

Chris Marsden  
23 March 2009

A bitter row between Arthur Scargill and Neil Kinnock has played itself out in the media and at rival public meetings in the UK.

Kinnock, the former Labour Party leader, has accused Scargill, the former president of the National Union of Mineworkers, of being the architect of the defeat of the 1984-85 miners' strike. This is supposedly because of his refusal to hold a national ballot before the strike began, which would, claims Kinnock, have guaranteed unity "across the mining labour force".

Scargill has responded with a series of denunciations of his own. Referring to a newly published book on the strike that cites the Labour leader's private papers, Scargill said that the man who now presents a national ballot as a prescription against scabbing in reality "secretly met with the head of the South Wales NCB [National Coal Board] to ensure coal went to Llanwern [steel works]".

Others had "acted in the same way", Scargill continued.

He concluded, "If Kinnock had given his full support and called on workers to support the strike, as the party had done in 1981, Thatcher would have been out of office in my view in a year.... Neil Kinnock, by his failure to call on workers to not cross picket lines, betrayed the miners".

The exchange says much more about Scargill's politics than it does Kinnock's. There is nothing, after all, that Scargill can say that will substantially lower the opinion class conscious workers have of Kinnock. He was and remains a notorious opponent of the miners' strike, a former left who was instrumental in beginning Labour's transformation into an overt party of big business, who resigned as party leader in order to join the gravy train in Brussels as a European Union commissioner, and who now sits in the House of Lords as Baron Kinnock of Bedwellty.

Now, 25 years after the event, Scargill chooses to denounce Kinnock and others for betraying the miners, up to and including organising strikebreaking. The question that must be asked, however, is why did he not launch such a political broadside in 1984 when it would have done some good?

He clearly knows all of those who colluded in inflicting the greatest industrial defeat suffered by the British working class

since 1926. Kinnock is only one of many, and Scargill has cited in a *Guardian* article on the strike's anniversary the "betrayals by the TUC [Trades Union Congress] and the class collaboration of union leaders such as Eric Hammond (the electricians' EETPU) and John Lyons (Engineers and Managers Association), who instructed their members to cross picket lines", as well as the leaders of the pit deputies union NACODS, who betrayed an 82 percent ballot vote for strike action that would have ended all coal production at scabbing pits.

One must ask how few are there within the Labour Party and the TUC leadership who did not betray the miners? No one broke ranks and defied those cited on this roll-call of shame. And if Scargill was more honest, he could have made his charge with much greater force. Kinnock may have been in secret negotiations over coal supplies to steel plants, but Welsh NUM leader Emlyn Williams was openly doing so, as was Mick McGahey in Scotland and Jack Taylor in Yorkshire.

But Scargill only mildly rebukes "many on the left" of the NUM "particularly those in the Communist Party", who supported coal dispensations "for power stations, cement works, steelworks or coking plants whose coal stocks were extremely low".

These were individuals who were at the time considered close political allies of Scargill—unlike his overt opponents grouped around *Marxism Today*, such as Martin Jacques and Beatrix Campbell, who can still make a quick buck out of writing condemnations of the strike for the *Guardian*.

Scargill, for all his left rhetoric then and now, is himself ultimately responsible for the defeat of the miners. Not because he did not organize a ballot, but because he refused to wage a political struggle against the Labour Party and trade union leaders who were doing the Tories' dirty work.

As to why he did not do so, Scargill is of course still hated by Kinnock and his ilk, because he was the head of the most left-wing trade union in modern British history and because he led the last great industrial struggle of the British working class. Nevertheless, he was and remains a trade union bureaucrat who maintained his silence on what the TUC and Labour Party were doing because he placed his own ties to the bureaucracy above the fundamental interests of the miners and the working class.

This is not simply because of a shared social position, a desire to not endanger his substantial salary and other perks associated with the highest rank within the union apparatus. He was, after all, quite prepared to go to prison during the strike, face sequestration of his and the union's assets, and to defy the courts, the police and the government.

A Stalinist since his days in the Young Communist League aged 17 and an NUM official since 1964, Scargill's entire political outlook was based upon the belief that the labour bureaucracies were the real instruments of social change. As such, his own perspective offered no alternative to that of the rest of the Labour Party and TUC.

Now 71, politically Scargill was already a man out of his time by 1984—advancing a perspective for which there was no longer an objective basis. Explaining his aim for the miners' strike, he told the *Guardian* that he wanted a return to the Plan for Coal, a "tripartite agreement" based on preserving a protected and state subsidized coal industry that was "signed by a Labour government, the National Coal Board (NCB) and the mining trade unions in 1974, and endorsed by Thatcher in 1981".

The 1984-85 strike was conducted based on Scargill's belief that he could repeat the successes of the miners' strike of 1974 that brought down the government of Edward Heath. He wanted to bring down the Thatcher government and put Kinnock in Number Ten. Instead, the strike was isolated and betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy in a campaign spearheaded by Kinnock and the entire Labour leadership.

Today Kinnock speaks with open contempt of Scargill's ambitions to bring down the Tories.

"The strike was ruined the minute it was politicised, and in the mind of Arthur Scargill it was always a political struggle", he declared. "He gave himself the credit for the success of the 1974 strike, but that was much exaggerated.

"He had the illusion that if the workers were united, they could destabilise, even overthrow a democratically elected government. That was the falsehood of Scargill's conclusion, and that is why I have always condemned him."

Kinnock states, "I was then the leader of a political party with a reduced political base being further undermined by the very action that Scargill was undertaking. The idea that I could have transformed the conditions of the strike by 'calling on workers', in his phrase, to come out in support of the miners is sheer fantasy. That's the kindest word that I can use."

There is at least a kernel of truth in this self-serving apologia. By 1984, the Labour Party was in an advanced stage of political decay. Brought to office in 1974, two years later Labour leader James Callaghan had already proclaimed a death sentence on the party's old reformist programme, stating that, "We used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting government spending. I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists, in so far as it ever did exist".

Labour went on to impose wage freezes and other measures

demanding by the International Monetary Fund while in an electoral bloc with the Liberals—attacks on the working class that culminated in the Winter of Discontent and the eventual victory of Thatcher in 1979. The same degeneration was manifest in the trade unions, as was so tragically demonstrated in the miners' strike itself, and their transformation today into instruments for imposing the demands of corporate management.

At its heart, the degeneration of the old labour movement was the product of fundamental shifts within economic life that were already well underway by the 1980s. The development of globally organised production by huge transnational corporations had undermined the nation as the basic unit of economic life and with it the system of national economic regulation that was the basis of the old programme of Labour and the trade unions. With the bourgeoisie seeking to claw back all of the concessions to the working class it had once been forced to make, it was no longer possible for the bureaucracy to combine its essential defence of capitalism with even a limited struggle for reforms. To preserve its privileged existence, the bureaucracy was now called upon to spearhead the struggle against the working class that began in earnest with the betrayal of the miners and has continued ever since.

Looking back on these events and the splenetic exchange between Scargill and Kinnock, one thing must be understood: the betrayals of Labour and the trade unions, their conversion into right-wing instruments of the major corporations, could not and cannot be answered based on the militant syndicalism advocated by Scargill. It failed in the miners' strike and has failed ever since.

It was only in 1996, after the ditching of Clause IV on social ownership by Tony Blair, that Scargill finally concluded that Labour was beyond saving and set up his Socialist Labour Party. But he still hoped that some of his fellow left bureaucrats would follow his lead and take up the fight for old-style Labourism. None did. The SLP ended up as a mere vanity project, with a membership made up of ageing worshippers of Joseph Stalin and politically thoughtless fans of the grand old man of the now defunct NUM.

What the working class needs is a new party and new organizations of struggle based on the socialist and internationalist perspective of Marxism. This is something no section of the labour bureaucracy will ever countenance. It is a task that must be undertaken by the workers' themselves, under the leadership of the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**