British police training facility opened in former mining village

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This month a new £7 million police training centre was opened at Manvers in the middle of what was the South Yorkshire coalfield before its wilful destruction by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher 25 years ago. According to a report in the *South Yorkshire Times*, "nearly 100 training staff and over 70 Major Incident members from Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham, along with a Cold Case Review team, have moved in since August."

With "the Forces public order training base at another site in Manvers, the state-of-the-art complex now has unrivalled critical incident and public order training facilities based in the Dearne Valley."

Chief Constable Meredydd Hughes commented, "Born out of the 2007 floods that damaged our training school at Ecclesfield in Sheffield, and built in the mining communities at the heart of our county, it demonstrates our resilience and our ability to meet the challenges we face in the future. It comes at a time when there is increasing demand for training and sharing good practice."

Hughes' words are brazenly cynical. It was police, on horseback and wielding shields and batons, who were used against the miners in the 1984-1985 strike. Miners were jailed, villages raided at night and families intimidated.

After the strike ended entire communities were left decimated. The miners at Manvers Main were among the most militant in Yorkshire. A massive police operation was mobilised to ensure that the colliery's sole scab could make it past the picket.

The decision to build the police complex on this site has a definite element of spite attached to it.

Hughes did not elaborate on the type of "challenges" he believes the complex will be called on to address, nor why he thinks there is to be "increasing demand for training and sharing good practice." But the police will be tasked with suppressing rising opposition to government cuts that will wipe out every social gain made since the end of the Second World War.

The ruling elite is only too aware that by imposing this type of scorched-earth social policy on families already suffering major hardships it will provoke mass unrest. Even before the full effects of the cuts to social services are felt, the continuous rise in utility bills and food and petrol prices is making it virtually impossible for millions to keep their heads above water.

It is for this reason that an expensive retraining of the police in public order operations is required. The government is cutting back on police numbers, causing disquiet in some quarters. It is trying to encourage wardens and unpaid volunteers to do some of the more mundane work, allowing officers to concentrate on training in the latest weapons handling and covert methods of policing, with the aid of advanced technology.

The complex has been built at a strategic location so that when necessary it will be able to strike out into any of the nearby towns. The Manvers complex will train police in setting up provocations, physically disrupting demonstrations and strikes, and carrying out spying operations against workers' political organisations.

In the 1970s and 1980s, units such as the Special Patrol Group carried out such operations. During the miners' strike soldiers wearing police uniforms were drafted and police forces were rotated around the country so as not to be recognised by pickets.

It was not, however, the strength and technical ability of the police and state forces that accounted for the miners' defeat. More decisive was that, despite their courage and the heroic nature of their stand, the miners were isolated by the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party. This was possible due to the leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) under its president, Arthur Scargill.

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the strike last year, Scargill wrote an article for the *Guardian* entitled "We Could Surrender—Or Stand Up and Fight." In it, Scargill blamed everyone else for the defeat of the strike, from the pit deputies' union NACOD to other members of the NUM executive and regional leaders.

He made a comparison between the mass pickets at Saltley

coke depot in Birmingham during the 1972 miners strike—which forced the Heath Conservative government to make a temporary retreat—and that at Orgreave in 1984.

"The fundamental difference," Scargill wrote, is that whereas at Saltley "picketing on my demand was increased," at Orgreave after June 18, 1984 "the pickets were completely withdrawn by the NUM Yorkshire and Derbyshire areas and other coalfield leaders."

He continued, "Had picketing at Orgreave been increased… I have no doubt that Orgreave—and Scunthorpe—would have faced immediate closure, forcing the government to settle the strike."

For Scargill, nothing in the world or within Britain itself had changed in the 12 years between Saltley and Orgreave. In fact, everything had changed.

The oil crisis of 1973, followed in 1976 by the International Monetary Fund intervention under the Labour government, fully exposed the historical decline of British capitalism. The IMF insisted that Britain was living beyond its means and had to cut back economically. This agenda was imposed by Labour under James Callaghan, by the Liberal-Labour Coalition of 1977, and then by the Conservative government of Thatcher.

During this time, with the help of the development of computer technology, the world economy had become truly globally integrated and companies and production were no longer confined within national boundaries. The NUM policy was the "Plan for Coal," based on protecting the home market through measures such as import bans and production controls.

It was a plan that suited the interests of the NUM bureaucracy, who would secure a seat of power for themselves at tripartite meetings alongside management and government. But such national corporatist plans were totally undermined by the objective developments in the world economy.

Instead of the Plan for Coal, which divided workers along national lines, the miners needed a perspective aimed at unifying their struggle with workers throughout the world. That would have meant rejecting Scargill's political perspective and taking up a struggle against the trade union and Labour bureaucracy.

Scargill's article continued; "A full account of the strike of 1984-85 is still to be written. However, we have learned more and more about the then-Labour party leader Neil Kinnock's treachery, the betrayals by the TUC and the class collaboration of union leaders such as Eric Hammond [of the electricians' union, the EETPU] and John Lyons [of the Engineers and Managers Association], who instructed their members to cross picket lines and did all they could to defeat the miners."

Such actions, Scargill wrote, meant a failure "to give the miners a level of support that would have stopped the Tories' pit closure programme and thus changed the political direction of the nation."

This only begs the question why, when the miners were being battered on the picket lines and imprisoned by the state, Scargill did not openly challenge the TUC leaders and demand that the entire trade union movement be called out in the miners' defence. Why did he not demand that the Labour "lefts" around Tony Benn, who claimed to back the miners, take up a struggle to kick Kinnock out of the Labour leadership, as part of the fight to bring down the Tory government and replace it with a Labour government committed to socialist policies?

This would have won huge support from millions of workers and youth that were also suffering under Thatcher's relentless attacks. A mass movement of workers going on the offensive would have changed the entire political atmosphere and transformed the relationship of class forces. Instead, the TUC and Labour Party leaderships were left in charge to isolate and defeat the miners, while they continued their own rush to the right.

Scargill claimed that the "legacy of the NUM's strike of 1984-85" is that it "remains not only an inspiration for workers, but a warning to today's union leaders of their responsibility to their members and the need to challenge both government and employers over all forms of injustice, inequality and exploitation."

This is not true. Its legacy is that the vast majority of miners lost their jobs and only eight deep mine pits survive in Britain today. The NUM went from a membership in excess of 300,000 to less than 1,500. Rather than an inspiration, it serves as tragic testimony to the bankrupt character of a national reformist perspective and the trade union apparatus.

Now 72, Scargill split from New Labour in 1996 and launched the Socialist Labour Party in order to champion a return to the old national reformist nostrums of the Labour Party. But the miners strike struck the death knell for Scargill's perspective, which can lead only to defeat and yet more misery and social degradation. For the working class to go forward, it has to base its struggles on the Marxist scientific method and a revolutionary international socialist perspective.