

Former leader Arthur Scargill makes apologia for British National Union of Mineworkers

Julie Hyland
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The gulf between the trade union bureaucracy and the working class was brought into sharp relief by an event held Monday evening at Wortley Hall, Sheffield.

Billed as a “tribute to the Mining Industry and those who fought to defend it,” the meeting was called to launch the Ashes and Diamonds Exhibition by artist Darren Coffield. Politically, however, it was a cover-up for the National Union of Mineworkers’ betrayal of the 1984-1985 year-long miners’ strike and the union’s role in facilitating the imposition of conditions of super-exploitation in Britain’s mining industry.

Overseeing the launch was Arthur Scargill, honorary president of the NUM and leader of the pro-Stalinist Socialist Labour Party (SLP), and Ken Capstick, former Yorkshire NUM vice president and editor of *The Miner* newspaper. A sizeable portion of the audience consisted of trade union bureaucrats, Stalinists and SLP sympathisers.

In his remarks, Scargill declared, “To those who say leaders always sell out—we never sold out.” The “tragedy” of the strike, he continued, was that “other leaders didn’t come to our assistance.” If they had done so “we wouldn’t have the cuts or be in this mess today,” he said, referring to the global economic crisis.

The former NUM leader never addressed the fact that he played the lead role in refusing to mobilise the broad-based support for the miners in a political rebellion against the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party, which were working to isolate the strike. In doing so, Scargill and the Stalinist leadership of the NUM not only prepared the way for the miners’ defeat, they politically facilitated the rightward lurch of the entire bureaucracy, which found its most grotesque expression in Tony Blair’s New Labour project.

It was the Labour government that in 1997 took over the big business agenda first set out by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. Social inequality reached unprecedented levels under Labour as it did the bidding of the financial oligarchy. Its final service in government was the multi-million-pound bailout of the banks and the super-rich in the wake of the 2008 crash—a transfer of public funds that is now being recouped through sweeping austerity measures against working people.

Scargill declared, “I am an optimist. Look at the positive side.” Pointing to “the preservation of jobs,” he boasted, “Look at what my union did.”

Indeed! Nearly 200,000 mining jobs have been destroyed since the defeat of the miners’ strike. Scargill’s comments were made, moreover, as the reality of the remaining jobs has been made apparent in the most tragic manner.

In the last two months, five miners have been killed in pits in South Wales and Yorkshire. On September 15, Phillip Hill (45), Garry Jenkins (39), David Powell (50), and Charles Breslin (62) were killed at the Gleision drift mine, Swansea Valley, Wales, when a wall collapsed, flooding the tunnel where they were working.

Twelve days later, Gerry Gibson (49) was killed in a roof collapse at Kellingley Colliery, operated by UK Coal in North Yorkshire. Another miner, Philip Sheldon, was injured in the same incident.

Just days before the Wortley Hall launch, three miners had to be rescued from the Aberpergwm drift mine in Glynneath, South Wales, after being trapped underground for an hour when a trench caved in. Two suffered back injuries and were taken to hospital, while

another was treated at the scene.

Three weeks before this, Wayne Morris (48) was seriously injured in another roof collapse at the Unity drift mine, barely eight miles from Gleision and one mile from Aberpergwm.

These incidents have exposed the revival of Dickensian-style levels of exploitation in Britain's mines. Nationally, the number of mining deaths has risen from three between 2000 and 2006 to 17 from 2006 to today.

Neither Scargill nor Capstick mentioned the growing toll of deaths and injuries. There was no minute of silence for the Gleision victims, nor was there a collection for their grieving families.

This silence bespeaks a contemptuous disregard for the miners whom Scargill and Capstick claim to celebrate. They cannot honestly address these tragedies because the NUM has played a key role in facilitating the conditions that gave rise to them.

Following the Kellingley incident, for example, the NUM issued a joint statement with UK Coal promising a "rigorous inquiry." The NUM, along with the other mining unions, is currently in discussions to agree to longer shifts as well as other attacks on working conditions. This is the inevitable and terrible outcome of the "Plan for Coal" championed by Scargill and the NUM during the miners' strike—a policy of national protectionism, predicated on driving up exploitation so as to compete on the global market.

Speaking at the Wortley Hall launch, Socialist Equality Party member Malcolm Bray rejected the claims made by Scargill and Capstick.

"As a miner who worked at Woolley Colliery, South Yorkshire, and was out for the entire 12 months of the struggle, I can testify that the miners' strike was not a famous victory, but a disastrous defeat," Bray said. "The communities throughout South Yorkshire and across the country have been devastated over this 25-year period and have never recovered."

Bray continued, "The lesson of the past 25 years is that miners, workers and youth cannot allow the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to dictate the political agenda based on a defence of capitalism."

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The Socialist Equality Party invites workers and youth to attend its public meeting, "The Gleision Mining Tragedy and the Revival of Dickensian

Exploitation" on Monday 28 November at 7pm, at the Yorkshire Coalfield Resource Centre (Thornecroft Centre), Halfpenny Lane, Pontefract WF8 4AY.



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