

UK coal mine faces closure

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One of Britain's last deep coal mines, Maltby, faces closure as a result of geological problems at the site. Ninety-day notices of redundancy have been issued to all 540 staff at the South Yorkshire colliery.

The threat has been hanging over the miners at the pit since May 2012 when owners Hargreaves Services let it be known that gas, oil and water leaking from a new coal face had cast doubt over the mine's future, even as officials announced record annual profits. The company bought the mine in 2009 from UK Coal.

The problems at Maltby overshadowed the group's preliminary results for 2012 to the end of May, a period that saw revenue rise 25 percent to £688.3 million [\$US 1.1 billion], driving a 17 percent increase in pre-tax profits to £43.1 million [\$US 69 million]. As well as mining operations, Hargreaves offers bulk haulage and other support services to industry.

Opened in 1908, Maltby still produces more than one million tonnes of coal a year, with about 60 percent of its output supplied to Drax, Europe's largest coal-fired power plant. Only nine months ago, with great fanfare, 50 first-time miners were taken on at the pit when management added a new shift.

It appeared as though the pit was going to close immediately when the company warned that unusual geological conditions threatened profits, as water started to seep into new sections and cause production delays. Initially, a third of the value was wiped off share prices at the cost of £16 million and the latter fell again by 20 percent in September.

Abandoning the coalface meant the mothballing or even closure of the Rotherham mine, the company said, as it would be "uneconomic" to switch production to

another coalface, or panel, given the disruption to output.

David Price, National Union of Mineworkers branch secretary at Maltby, said he was "optimistic the geological problems at the site could be solved. Miners would make the pit as difficult as possible for these people to shut. They will work hard to try and make it stay open".

Price apparently believes the miners can cut off the panel-T125 containing the fault and work on the shortened coalface. In proceeding with the redundancy notices, the company are using the situation to pressure and exploit the miners as much as possible in an attempt to overcome the losses they suffered.

In February this year a split occurred between the Maltby NUM and Yorkshire area officials, when the Maltby miners voted against national President Chris Kitchen and elected their own branch delegate. The geological fault was discovered shortly after this.

The NUM is a mere rump of the organisation it was at the time of the bitter 1984-85 strike, when it represented over 180,000 miners at 170 collieries. There are now just four deep mines and a handful of surface pits in the UK, employing six to seven thousand miners.

The principal responsibility for this belongs to then NUM president Arthur Scargill and the rest of the NUM leadership who shackled their members throughout the year-long strike to the national corporatist programme, "The Plan for Coal". Scargill and other NUM officials refused to challenge the strike's isolation by the Trades Union Congress and Labour Party, which were opposed to a struggle to

bring down the Thatcher Conservative government.

The NUM bureaucrats are now more interested in scuttling around the Chancery Court in London to pick over what's left of the union's assets than organising a fight to protect jobs at Maltby. Trustees of the Yorkshire NUM are appealing an earlier court decision granting Scargill £13,500 in damages in a dispute over money towards a new car. They are also seeking to limit the number of years the 73-year-old Scargill can hang on to his grace-and-favour home at the Barbican in central London.

The same holds true for the local Labour Party. A spokesman for Rotherham Borough Council said the authorities were "disappointed to hear that redundancy notices are being issued at Maltby. However, if redundancies did go ahead, the council would do all it could to support the company and its workers".

The chairman of Maltby town council, John Garrett, said he was "absolutely gutted. I've heard this news and can't believe they're going to close the colliery".

All of them express surprise that bosses act like bosses, only interested in the bottom line. None of them propose any way forward for the Maltby's workforce.

The threat of unemployment confronts workers in the area with a social disaster. A quarter of children in South Yorkshire are living in poverty, and their parents go hungry to feed them, according to Save the Children's "It shouldn't happen here" report. The charity claims 23 percent of children in Sheffield, Barnsley and Doncaster are living in poverty and 22 percent of youngsters in Rotherham also exist below the breadline.

In Yorkshire and the Humber as a whole, 32 percent of children—around 300,000 youngsters—live in poverty. One in eight of the poorest children in the UK go without at least one hot meal a day. One in 10 of the country's poorest parents have cut back on food to make sure their children can eat.

A new strategy has to be adopted by the working class if it is to prevent the capitalist class continuing to

push it on this downward spiral to poverty and despair. Maltby miners must not rely on trying to convince management to keep the pit open by promising to work even harder. The decision over whether the mine stays open or closes must be taken into the workers' own hands.

Learning from the lessons of the one-year strike, miners must organise independently of the NUM and adopt a new international socialist strategy. The demand must be that all redundancy notices are withdrawn. An action committee, including representatives of all workers in the area, the unemployed, and young people needs to be established to take the struggle forward.



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