

Britain: Oppose the closure of Maltby Colliery

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Campaigners from the Socialist Equality Party are circulating this leaflet at Maltby Colliery and the nearby village of the same name. Maltby is one of the four remaining deep mines in the UK. It is scheduled to close by the end of March.

Miners at Maltby Colliery in Rotherham, South Yorkshire must oppose its threatened closure by Hargreaves Services PLC and launch a fight to keep the pit open.

In November, Hargreaves announced that it was issuing 90-day redundancy notices on the pit's 540 miners and staff because of geological and financial problems. Instead of immediately opposing the closure, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) announced it would work on a plan in joint consultation with management and the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM), founded as a scab organisation during the 1984-85 miners strike, to overcome these difficulties.

The only "plan" was to call on miners to work harder to make the pit more profitable. This week Hargreaves issued a statement saying the working group could find no "viable alternative solution" and the pit would close in March. The company "remains committed to exploring alternative employment opportunities for staff, both within the wider Hargreaves Group and externally," it added.

On television Dave Price, NUM branch secretary at Maltby, thanked the company for "giving the workers their due redundancy pay".

"From this moment we can now work and strive to see what employment we can get for the members at Maltby," he said, without mentioning where the jobs are to come from. Seventy young apprentices were just taken on in February when Hargreaves started to operate the five-shift system at the pit in the hope of increasing productivity.

Maltby's closure will mean only three deep mines are left in the UK—Daw Mill, Kellingley and Thorsby—employing just over 3,000 miners. UK Coal has already announced that Daw Mill in Warwickshire, once the UK's most productive mine, could be mothballed in 2014 because of geological difficulties. There have been 90 redundancies at the mine.

At the beginning of the 1984-85 miners strike there were over 170 mines in the UK and more than 180,000 miners.

The Maltby miners must take up a fight in defence of their pit based upon a perspective that has a chance of succeeding, not the treacherous and failed policies of the NUM. This means a socialist and internationalist programme for the independent political mobilisation of the working class.

The miners cannot accept the argument that closure is inevitable because the profitability of the company demands it. To agree to this is to accept a lifetime of low wages or unemployment for themselves and for their children.

Hargreaves is involved in haulage as well as mining. Monkton Coke works and the coal terminals at Immingham, Newport and Ghent in Belgium are serviced by the company. It is the largest independent importer of coal into the UK, as well as the leading importer of coke and refractory minerals into Europe, with a turnover of £552.3 million and 2,500 employees. When Hargreaves initially discovered the geological fault at Maltby it claimed the costs could be absorbed, but once share prices began to take a significant hit this was reversed.

As always, the miners are paying the price. It is the same the world over. In Australia, for example, BHP has insisted that miners there are too highly paid to compete with their US counterparts and have called for wages to be almost halved. BHP threatened that

governments around the world needed to understand that mining was a globally mobile industry, and that unless favourable taxation and regulatory policies were promoted then it would simply shift operations to other countries.

This message is well understood by governments everywhere, all of which are imposing savage austerity measures to meet the dictates of the banks and corporations. There is no country in the world where the ruling class is not demanding “shared sacrifice” from the working class even as they impose policies that make the rich get even richer while workers are driven into a downward spiral of unemployment, poverty and ill health.

Only adopting an anti-capitalist perspective, for the replacement of the profit system with planned production for need and of international competition between capitalist corporations and state with the international collaboration of the working class can provide a way forward.

For this reason, the decision whether or not to close the pit cannot be left to management. Miners must demand the opening of the company books and accounts so they can independently ascertain the true state of the pit’s geological and financial situation.

In carrying out this fight, miners must turn to the broadest possible sections of workers and youth. Action Committees should be built to mobilise the unemployed, the youth and other workers in South Yorkshire behind the miners. Miners must also reject all demands that they unite with their employers against miners and workers in other countries and adopt as their central aim the forging of a common class struggle front across all national divisions.

The lesson must be drawn from the recent struggle in Spain, where 7,000 miners galvanised the support of 500,000 Spanish workers and youth to oppose the austerity measures of the right-wing Popular Party government. These workers and millions like them are the natural allies of miners and workers in Britain.

But just as in Spain, where the miners were forced back to work after 67 days by their unions, the success of any struggle depends upon a break with the NUM and the building of a new leadership.

The defeat suffered by the miners in 1985 has shaped the lives of every miner since. But its causes are still not understood, enabling the union bureaucracy to

claim that industrial action is pointless and only collaboration with the employers has any hope of saving jobs.

In reality, the NUM was the architect of the miners’ defeat, along with the rest of the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party. The miners lost because Arthur Scargill, the Stalinist leader of the NUM, refused to fight the right-wing leaders of the TUC and Labour Party and demand they call out all other sections of the trade union movement to bring down the Conservative government. Not only the miners, but millions of workers and youth continue to pay a price for this betrayal.

In the aftermath of 1985, pit after pit was closed, as the NUM proposed first a campaign to secure popular support for them to remain open followed by acceptance of closure when this naturally failed. The industry was broken up and a much-reduced profitably sector handed over to private owners. Today the NUM is indistinguishable from other unions that work hand in glove with management, corporations and government only by the scale of its collapse into a tiny rump of a few thousand members.

Its leaders do little other than collect their pay packets, administer pensions and compensation claims until being called in by management to impose the latest speed-ups, redundancies or closure on their members.

Miners must ask the question: If victory in 1985 depended upon the mobilisation of a mass political movement of the working class and not just 180,000 miners against the government, how much more so does success depend today? And is such a struggle possible under the leadership of the NUM? To ask such questions is to answer them. The Socialist Equality Party urges all miners who agree with what we have argued to make contact, join our party and begin to organise a fight back.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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