

Thatcher planned to use army against 1984-1985 British miners' strike

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Papers released by the UK's National Archives reveal that the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher developed detailed plans to use the army to break the year-long 1984-1985 miners' strike.

Cabinet papers from 1984 released after 30 years show that plans were drawn up to use troops to move coal stocks. This was despite official government policy ruling out the use of the armed forces. The plan drawn up involved using 4,500 soldiers to drive vehicles including 1,650 tipper lorries, capable of moving 100 kilo-tonnes a day of coal to the power stations.

Another plan was hatched, codenamed Operation Halberd, to use troops in the event of a prolonged dockworkers' strike.

The documents reveal that the government, in alliance with the National Coal Board, had a secret "hit list" to close many more coal mines than the 20 originally announced, which had provoked the strike with the 170,000-strong National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

The Thatcher government always denied that such a plan was in place. A meeting was held in September 1983 at Downing Street attended by just seven people, including the prime minister, the chancellor, the energy secretary and the employment secretary. One document states that this meeting heard of the National Coal Board's new chairman Ian MacGregor's plan to close 75 pits by the following year, and to cut 64,000 jobs.

The record of the meeting notes, "There should be no closure list, but a pit-by-pit procedure."

It added: "The manpower at the end of that time in the industry would be down to 138,000 from its current level of 202,000."

These closures would have resulted in two thirds of Welsh miners being made redundant, a third of those in

Scotland, almost half of those in northeast England, half in South Yorkshire and almost half in the South Midlands. The entire Kent coalfield would close.

Following the defeat of the strike, the government moved rapidly to impose its plans with 170 pits closed over the next decade. In 1994, the remaining 15 pits were privatised.

Once the strike began, the government deployed the entire force of the state, including the development of a nationally operating, politicised police force. Some 20,000 miners were injured or hospitalised, 13,000 arrested, 200 imprisoned, 2 killed on picket lines and 966 sacked.

A May 25, 1984, document to Thatcher from one of her advisors warns of the tenacity of the miners. Under a section titled "How will it end?", the author writes, "Miners endurance is notoriously long (26 weeks in 1926 without social security) and should not be underestimated."

The plan to use troops against the miners had been developed over a long period. Documents released last year to the National Archives, covering 1983, revealed that the Cabinet Office meeting that year discussed that moving half a million tonnes of coal a week would involve between 4,000 and 5,000 lorry journeys a day.

The use of troops for this was discussed, with a memorandum warning: "The law-and-order problems of coping with pickets not just at the power stations but also at the pitheads would be enormous and would arise from the very outset of the strike."

The 1984 papers confirm that the main concern of the government was to ensure that the miners remained isolated from other critical groups of workers. Following the outbreak of a national dockers' strike on July 8 as a result of efforts to break their embargo on moving scab coal, a special cabinet committee, held on

July 18, discussed “possible strategies for the coal and docks dispute.”

The committee discussed a plan to mobilise troops in 13 specialist teams that could be used to unload 1,000 tonnes a day at the docks. The meeting discussed that this would require a declaration of a state of emergency.

A paper discussed at the meeting contained advice from Peter Gregson, head of the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Unit. He wrote: “The political and economic stake[s] are much higher for the government in the coal dispute than in the docks dispute. Priority should therefore be: end the dock strike as quickly as possible, so that the coal dispute can be played as long as possible.”

The government knew that any prolonged dockers’ strike, in alliance with the miners, would soon lead to a severe economic crisis and shortages of basic foodstuffs. Norman Tebbit, Thatcher’s employment secretary, wrote to her as the dockers’ strike began, “I do not see that time is on our side.”

The agriculture minister, Peggy Fenner, warned that food supplies would suffice in the UK for the next 10 days, but that panic buying could drastically alter the situation. She said shortages of varieties of fruit and vegetables, bacon, oil and fats and hard wheat were likely.

Another advisor added, “Even if no problem over food and oil... serious disruption to industry will soon be felt and there will be pressure on government to find a solution.” He told Thatcher that troops had not been used to break a dock strike since 1950, and warned such action could result in a massive escalation of the dispute.

According to the documents, Armed Forces Minister John Stanley said “a considerably larger scale” operation than the 2,800 troops set to be mobilised in the plan could be organised.

The latest revelations underscore the critical role played by the trade union bureaucracy, without whose assistance the government could not have defeated the miners.

The government did not have to resort to smashing the dockers’ strike by force, as the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) called off the strike within hours—fully aware of the consequences of this betrayal for the miners. At the time, the dockers’ strike

had paralysed 61 ports around the UK.

A further dockers’ strike in August was also speedily called off.

As well as the dockers’ strike, partial and unofficial blocks on the movement of coal were imposed by railway workers and lorry drivers, but official secondary supportive strike action was opposed by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and its affiliated unions.

A strike by overseers known as pit deputies was also called off on the basis of a rotten compromise. Without the deputies, no coal mines could have been worked and the concerted campaign by the Tories and the police to encourage scabbing would have come to nothing.

From the beginning of the strike, the Tories had the full measure of the union bureaucracy. One of the new documents notes a telephone call between Thatcher and Peter Walker, her secretary of state for energy, on April 20, 1984, just six weeks after the strike began. Walker told Thatcher that the vital power section of the TGWU “wanted nothing to do with the strike.”

A document previously noted by the *World Socialist Web Site* shows that the NUM under the leadership of Arthur Scargill was fully complicit in the demobilisation and isolation of the strike. On March 16, the NUM sent a secret letter to the TUC explicitly stating: “No request is being made by this union for the intervention or assistance of the TUC.”

Scargill and his Stalinist allies in the NUM wanted to oppose a head-on conflict with the TUC and the Labour Party leadership at all costs—including the defeat of the strike and the devastation of Britain’s mining communities.

The author also recommends:

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[6 March 2009]



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