Closure of UK colliery exposes role of miners' union

Simon Whelan
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The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) say they are now looking at an employee buyout at Kellingley Colliery, Yorkshire, one of England's last remaining deep coal mines. The union says it is looking at a five-year plan. On its behalf, Keith Hartshorne recently stated: "If everything stacks up, we are looking at an employee buyout at the end of this, which would leave Kellingley run by the workforce."

Previously, UK Coal said it would close both Kellingley and Thoresby pits with the loss of 1,300 jobs by the end of 2015 in a bid to avoid insolvency. They blamed this on financial problems on the strength of sterling on international financial markets, the global coal market falling in price and a fire at the Daw Mill pit which led to it being closed in 2013.

But speaking about the union's plans, Andrew Mackintosh from UK Coal, said "They've got our support and we will give them as much information as they need."

In other words, the union bureaucracy intends to throw its membership under the juggernaut of the international commodity markets with the benediction of management. The Kellingley workforce already cuts 50,000 tonnes of coal per week but this is still unprofitable because cheaper coal can be imported from abroad. The workforce will have to invest their own money in a venture that has no guarantee of success.

The "worker buyout" has only one slim chance of "success" and this is by cutting the workforce, hiking productivity through speedups and reducing the workers' wages, terms and conditions. The impact on health and safety would be devastating.

A union that boasted 170,000 members prior to the defeat of the 1984-85 miners strike, with a militant tradition unsurpassed in the British labour movement, is now to take responsibility for raising more than half of the £5 million required to keep Kellingley operating, from the pockets of the workforce. For the privilege of employment the workforce will have to invest an astonishing £3 million, which no doubt will take the form of a down claim on future profits in an investment that might very well not be profitable.

This prime example of the rotten state of trade unionism is a salutary lesson for British workers. The unions no longer even maintain the pretence of defending conditions at the workplace. They have been fully transformed into appendages of big business who facilitate and share in the fruits of the exploitation of the workforce.

UK Coal initially planned to close the two pits with the loss of 1,300 jobs by the end of 2015 in a £20 million deal to avoid insolvency. The company secured a provisional £10 million loan in early April from the government to fund the closure of Thoresby Colliery in Nottinghamshire and Kellingley in North Yorkshire. The company say the two mines are uneconomic under conditions in which there is an influx of cheaper imported coal from the US, where a rapid expansion in shale gas production has coerced American coal mines to find new markets in Europe.

Squeezed between the NUM that is thoroughly implicated in the destruction of the British coal industry and a government that has the measure of the trade union bureaucracy, miners at Kellingley Colliery voted for a "managed closure" over 18 months. The workforce was offered a Hobson's choice—i.e., no choice—between "phased closure", or immediate closure within 48 hours.

After 250 NUM members at Kellingley in April voted by a show of hands to oppose closure, the union leadership could only say it wished for the government to explore alternative options for keeping the pit as a "going concern" and called for further talks. For its part, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) has urged the government to apply for European Union state aid instead. Andrew Mackintosh of UK Coal responded that the company supported the TUC efforts but the managed closure deal, including the £10 million government loan, was the sole means to avoid insolvency and immediate closure.

In response to UK Coal management's efforts to dragoon miners into accepting the closure, NUM general secretary Chris Kitchen mouthed only empty platitudes and supported a vote for a managed shutdown. "In order to fight to keep Kellingley open, we have to keep it open. So as much as a bitter pill as it is for them to swallow, then yes we have got time to fight if we accept the deal put together by UK Coal", he said.

When the ballot result in favour of a phased closure was announced, Kitchen had this to say: "At least the men will not be made a scapegoat for closing Kellingley early. The men had hoped to keep the pit open for a longer term future. It's been a tough decision, it's not nice to vote to put yourself or your mates on the dole."

After the announcement, Andrew Mackintosh of UK Coal implicitly acknowledged the role of the NUM. "The vote has been a great hurdle jumped over today, a good result I think. We were nervous before we went into it but the alternative to this was closure within a few days. So, difficult as this has been, it is the best option."

With the job done with collusion of the union, Mr Mackintosh said UK Coal would now report back to investors in the pit, including the government, to see if they would accept the result. He added, "It was a significant vote, that's what the investors were looking for." Business minister for the coalition government Michael Fallon has said the pits had no long-term future.

UK Coal operates both deep and open-cast mines in the North East of England and the Midlands. It is part of Coalfield Resources PLC, which employs around 2,000 workers. Only a little over a year ago, the company refused to deny it was seeking voluntary liquidation and was involved in talks over the future of its last two deep mines, in Kellingley and Thoresby in Nottinghamshire, along with six open cast pits in Shropshire and County Durham.

That announcement followed geological difficulties at their Daw Mill mine in Warwickshire, which cost 650 miners' jobs. UK Coal and the British government then seized on a fire at Daw Mill as an opportunity to transfer pension obligations into the state-owned Coal Authority. Presented as "nationalisation", the transparent aim of the move is to save UK Coal, which went through a huge restructuring operation in 2012, as a profitable concern, while dumping as much as possible of its considerable pension obligations onto the taxpayer.