Still The Enemy Within: The 1984-85 British miners' strike according to the pseudo-left

Paul Mitchell
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Directed by Owen Gower

The release of the new documentary, *Still the Enemy Within*, coincides with the 30th anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike.

The 112-minute film comprises unseen or rarely available archive footage, interspersed with news reports, dramatic reconstructions and interviews with those involved in the strike. It opens with the March 1984 announcement of the closure of Cortonwood Colliery, the spark that ignited the strike that then spread throughout the British coalfields. It also shows how the Nottingham area National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) refused to call out its members and became the centre of a strike-breaking operation by the Tory government.

A considerable portion of the documentary treats the brutal police attack on the mass picket at the Orgreave, South Yorkshire coke plant in June 1984, which was accompanied by the lockdown of mining communities and the beating, hospitalisation, arrest or imprisonment of thousands of miners. Three miners died during the strike, including David Gareth Jones, whose funeral is a poignant moment in the film.

Gower's *Still the Enemy Within* (a reference to a comment by Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher about the miners) also shows the growing involvement of miners' wives in the strike and includes interviews with LGBT and other activists. The current trend for downplaying class politics and elevating identity politics, which this film promotes, is discussed in more detail in the review of *Pride*.

The film ends with NUM leader Arthur Scargill announcing a return to work, followed by a news clip announcing massive pit closures. When the strike began there were 170 pits in the UK, employing over 181,000 men and producing 90 million tonnes of coal. Earlier this year UK Coal announced that it would be closing two of Britain's three remaining pits—leaving just Hatfield, now an employee benefit trust after running into financial difficulties last year.

The adverts for the film claim, "No experts, no politicians, just a unique insight into one of modern history's most dramatic events: the 1984-85 British Miners' Strike thirty years on, told by the people who were at the heart of Britain's longest strike, the workers themselves".

It goes on: "Ultimately, it's a universal tale of ordinary people standing up for what they believe in and one which challenges us to look again at our past so that, in the words of one speaker, 'we can still seek to do something about the future'".

These claims of "no experts, just ordinary workers" are fraudulent. It would be more honest of the filmmakers to have include a strapline: "The miners' strike … as interpreted and distorted by the Socialist Workers Party".

The film's executive producer Mike Simons was a leading journalist for the *Socialist Worker* (the SWP newspaper) at the time and co-authored *The Great Strike* in 1985 with current SWP leader Alex Callinicos. Producer Sinead Kirwan is the daughter of deceased SWP stalwart Rosey Kirwan and two of the four miners interviewed, Durham miner Norman Strike and Silverwood colliery electrician Steve Hammill, were members of the organisation. The film features songs from the band, The Redskins, two of whose members belonged to the SWP. In typically dishonest state capitalist fashion, none of these political affiliations are made clear.

Others in this film, portrayed as representing the voices of "ordinary people", are the leaders of Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC)—Anne Scargill (then wife of Arthur Scargill) and Joyce Sheppard, who announced at a recent Left Unity conference "After many decades of supporting the Labour Party, my patience has finally run out".

The overwhelming problem with *Still the Enemy Within*

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is its promotion of the SWP's pseudo-left perspective. By portraying the bitter, year-long strike as purely a fight between two giant forces, the Thatcherite state apparatus and "Scargill's Army", the filmmakers let the Trades Union Congress (TUC), its affiliated unions and the Labour Party entirely off the hook.

The betrayal of these latter forces laid the basis for and made possible a sustained offensive against the working class that has lasted until this day. The right-wing course so graphically displayed during the miners' strike has ended in the transformation of Labour into an overtly pro-big business party no different from the Tories and the unions into arms of corporate management.

None of this is dealt with in the documentary. Indeed, the unsuspecting viewer might be forgiven for not being aware that the Labour Party even existed. The only reference to that party is a fleeting and anonymous shot of its then leader Neil Kinnock.

The filmmakers also airbrush from history the rotten role of the unions in isolating the miners and carrying out the greatest betrayal in British labour history since the 1926 General Strike. There is footage of the Trades Union Congress in September 1984, which promised support that never materialised, and the calling off of a planned strike by pit supervisors. But these are treated in a perfunctory manner, glossing over the anger and opposition directed at the union bureaucracy expressed in the countless lobbies that took place.

One of the strike's most iconic moments—a noose descending over the head of the newly elected TUC general secretary, Norman Willis, as he spoke at a November 1984 rally in the Welsh coalfields blaming pickets for the violence—is omitted.

The film is especially hagiographic in its treatment of NUM President Arthur Scargill. At a recent SWP meeting discussing the film, WAPC leader Rose Hunter declared that if anyone was critical of Scargill she would show them the door. But the fact is the betrayal organised by the TUC and Labour Party's was never challenged politically by Scargill and the Stalinist leadership of the NUM, who confined the miners to a perspective of picketing pits and power stations. They refused to call on the working class to defy their leaders and come out in support of the miners, even though there would have been a powerful response.

The fact that the treacherous role of the unions is not criticised accounts for the substantial funding for the film provided by the Fire Brigades Union, Communication Workers Union, National Union of Teachers, University and College Union and over 100 other union branches. As the old adage says, he who pays the piper calls the tune.

By framing the film as the voice of "ordinary people", the SWP also omits any analysis of its own role in the strike. Even the mild criticisms the state capitalists made at the time are dropped to ingratiate themselves with the bureaucracy today.

The SWP argued for the building of a network of socialists in the workplaces, but solely to put pressure on the bureaucracy. According to Callinicos, the distinguishing feature of Marxism was "the recognition that trade unions play an essential role in the struggle to overthrow capitalism". It would be a mistake, Callinicos added, to conclude "that the trade union leaders are a thoroughly reactionary group of people … The trade union leaders are sometimes compelled, usually, against their will, to fight the bosses".

The SWP sought to justify this with the ludicrous claim that the TUC's commitment to a pro-capitalist "new realism" policy had been overturned, replaced by conference pledges to back the miners in their strike.

At the end of the conflict, the SWP acknowledged that the colossal struggle had been defeated by the bureaucracy and stated blithely that "even the most dedicated and militant socialist is likely to become a prisoner of the machine once elected to full-time office".

This was an observation quickly forgotten as the party directed its members into the trade union branches and trade councils, even though as SWP leading member Duncan Hallas stated, "most of them are shells", in order to help rebuild them. The unions have continued to shrink as workers turn their backs on these rotten organisations and on the Labour Party. However, SWP members now populate the upper echelons of several, including those funding the film. The film's refusal to criticise the Labour Party or the trade unions is in line with the overriding concern to protect these positions of privilege in the bureaucratic "machine".

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