Kellingley Colliery—last remaining deep coal mine in Britain—closes

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Three thousand people joined a march through the town of Knottingley on Saturday to mark the closure of nearby Kellingley Colliery in North Yorkshire, the last remaining deep coal mine in Britain.

Around 450 miners finished their final shifts at the pit Friday. For the loss of their jobs they are to receive severance pay of just 12 weeks' wages.

Kellingley, known locally as "the Big K", was once the largest deep-mine in Europe and could bring up to 900 tonnes of coal an hour to the surface.

A formidable series of architectural feats preceded the start of production in April 1965. In the 1950s, exploratory boreholes were sunk that established up to seven workable seams of coal, resulting in the construction and sinking of two shafts in 1960. Sandy and porous geology down to around 180 metres (600 feet) was waterlogged, so boreholes had to be drilled around each shaft and sub-zero temperature brine pumped through to freeze the ground down to around 200 metres (640 feet).

The shafts were eventually sunk to a depth of around 800 metres (2,600 feet). They were sealed with a concrete lining, the cooling brine stopped and the frozen ground allowed to thaw. A thin cement mixture was pumped into holes bored through the shaft's lining into the water-bearing strata. When this solidified, most of the water leaking into the shafts was stopped and the ground around the upper part of the shafts was stabilised.

The pressure from the pumping process caused the ground above to heave, and the winding engine towers mounted above the shafts tilted. This had been anticipated, and provision was made to jack up the four legs that each tower stood on until they were in alignment. Four steel lines were suspended around the inside of each shaft, all the way to the bottom.

The effort expended was testimony to the importance attached to coal production, which was seen not only in economic terms but also from the standpoint of maintaining a degree of energy independence for the national economy.

The new colliery was slated to employ 3,000 mineworkers on completion, but due to developments in the methods of production and machinery, only around 2,000 miners were employed at any one time.

Kellingley has witnessed a series of deaths, injuries and near accidents down the years. In all, 17 miners lost their lives in its 40-year history.

A miner from Kellingley, Joe Green, was killed after being hit by a lorry on June 15, 1984, during the year-long national miner s' strike.

The most recent fatalities include:

· Don Cook, who died in a rock fall on September 30, 2008.

· Ian Cameron, who died after equipment fell on him on October 18, 2009.

· Gerry Gibson, who was was killed, and another miner, who was injured, after an underground roof collapsed on September 27, 2011.

This fatality figure was narrowly prevented from dramatically increasing on November 30, 2010, when 200 workers were evacuated from the pit following an underground gas explosion.

Just days before Gibson's death in 2011, four other miners, Charles Breslin, David Powell, Garry Jenkins and Phillip Hill, were killed in a flooding disaster at Gleision colliery, a drift mine in Swansea Valley, Wales. These tragedies meant that 17 miners had been killed in UK coal mines in the previous five years.

Reporting the depth of anger surrounding the deaths in the Kellingley community, the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed to the fact that the increased productivity being squeezed out of fewer and fewer miners had led to desperate and dangerous working conditions of a Dickensian character.

Many miners were risking their lives for a job with

decent pay, rather than follow former colleagues into unemployment or low-paid work in the corporate call-centres and warehouses built on formerly pit-owned land.

With the connivance of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leadership, a workers buyout was advanced as a means of keeping Kellingley functioning until at least 2018. As the WSWS said at the time, "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."

When Kellingley opened, coal production in Britain employed around 500,000 workers and produced up to 177 million tonnes of coal. Today, a handful of mainly open cast pits employ around 4,000 miners producing 14 million tonnes of coal. Imports into the UK are now three times this figure.

The NUM boasted a membership of 170,000 prior to the defeat of the 1984-1985 miners' strike, with a militant tradition unsurpassed in the British labour movement.

Its final act at the last deep coal mine in Britain was to take responsibility for raising more than half of the £5 million required to keep Kellingley operating from the pockets of its members.

Reporters from the WSWS spoke to a number of those attending this weekend's rally:

Andy told our reporters, "This is the final blow to the coal industry. It's a really sad day. I was at Kellingley yesterday when the final shift came on. The look on the miners' faces said a lot. There has been a disappointing attitude—and no government support."

David, a local resident, said, "It's just a sad day for the town and the surrounding area. Obviously, with the closure of Ferrybridge Power Station on the horizon as well [due for closure in March 2016], it's looking grim for the communities around the pits.

"My grandparents worked in the pits. My grandfather actually wired up the electrics at Kellingley pit. My mother and father worked at the power station, so it affects everyone's family in the area."

John, a retired coal miner, said, "I worked in the Selby coalfield from 1980 to 1986. I was involved in the strike of 1984-1985. Since then, it's just been a systematic demise of industry per se in the UK. Today is the final chapter in the great industrial heritage we had."

When the WSWS reporters raised the responsibility of the Labour Party and the trade unions, including that of NUM President Arthur Scargill, who opposed a political struggle against these forces, John replied, "That's probably correct. Let's face it, it was the Labour Party that introduced the policy of no open cast coal in this country and then they signed up to climate agreements that meant the coal industry got run down.

"Obviously, at the time of the strike, the NUM was one of the strongest unions in the country, but they didn't get the support they probably needed at the time.

"In the age of austerity, the agenda of every politician is to cut public services. There is no industry now or high-paid jobs. The situation is dire. People just can't find jobs that are long-term and well-paid."

Jim, the son of a coal miner, told reporters , "The only good thing to come out of this is that we'll never hear that hooter [signifying an accident at the mine] go off again. My father was on the rescue teams at Lofthouse [on March 21, 1973, six miners were drowned by the sudden inrush of 3 million gallons of water, 228.6 metres (750 feet) below ground]. He and his friend found the men floating there. There was nothing they could do. It was terrible. It stayed with my father for the rest of his life.

"My grandfather, who was born in 1888, worked in Walton pit until around 1953. And my father worked at Newmarket Silkstone Colliery until 1976.

"It's an easy target to blame the Tories for all of this. New Labour was just as responsible. And Scargill did as much as anyone to sell out the 1984-1985 strike."

Another resident, Katie, said, "My dad worked at the mine for 37 years as a deputy. It's really sad that so many people who want to earn a decent living will not have jobs now. The decisions are made by the businessmen and politicians, and they don't take the working class into their considerations."