

UK: Why the nervousness over Johnson's praise for Thatcher's destruction of the coal industry?

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The fallout from Boris Johnson's much criticised "gaffe" over Britain's former mining communities is a revealing interlude.

Visiting an offshore windfarm in Scotland earlier this month, the prime minister said that former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher gave a "big early start" to green energy because she "closed so many coal mines across the country..."

Commentators and politicians piled in to describe the remarks as "crass", "vulgar" and "insulting", demanding the prime minister apologise, which he refused to do.

Johnson's portrayal of Thatcher as the original "eco-warrior" was deliberately provocative. He sniggered to the press pack following his remark, "I thought that would get you going."

That Johnson solidarises with Thatcher and the decimation of the mining industry is hardly surprising. He epitomises the arrogance and privilege of Britain's ruling elite and their contempt for working people.

He previously described Thatcher as a great "revolutionary and liberator" and said her death, in 2013, was a "national tragedy". He leads a Tory party that has consolidated Thatcher's anti-working class policies and xenophobic nationalism. This is a man who referred to black people as "piccannies" with "watermelon smiles" and said veiled Muslim women look like "letter boxes".

He leads a government that is responsible for one of the largest death rates in the world from COVID-19 through its "herd immunity" policy and is on record saying he would rather "let the bodies pile high in their thousands" than allow another lockdown.

All this is acceptable in ruling circles. Johnson's unpardonable sin in this instance was drawing attention to the last major class struggle in Britain—the miners' strike of March 1984 to March 1985.

Some 170,000 miners struck for one year against the destruction of their jobs and industry. Their action accounted for the largest number of strike days lost (over 26 million) since the 1926 General Strike.

Thatcher had planned since taking power in 1979 for a confrontation with the miners, who were the catalyst for the 1926 General Strike and had brought down her predecessor, Edward Heath, in 1974. The defeat of this key section of the working class, who Thatcher famously described as the "enemy within", was not merely retribution. It was essential to ruling class plans for a major restructuring of the economy and the wholesale transfer of social

wealth to the super rich.

As the WSWs explained on the 20th anniversary of the miners' strike, the major corporations, in response to the explosive global upheavals of 1968-1975 that had threatened capitalist rule, "sought to counteract falling rates of profit by an aggressive turn towards global investment and internationalised production. As part of this strategy, they demanded the deregulation of the economies of the advanced industrial countries, the slashing of tax rates and the destruction of welfare provision."

On March 6, 1984, the National Coal Board announced the closure of 20 collieries, with the loss of 20,000 jobs. The reaction was swift, as unofficial walkouts spread from Yorkshire and Scotland, to Wales, the North East and Kent, with only small pockets (in Nottingham and North Wales) remaining at work.

Over the next 12 months, more than 11,000 miners were arrested, 200 were imprisoned and at least 9,000 sacked for defending their jobs. There were running confrontations with the police and two miners, David Gareth Jones and Joe Green, were killed.

The strike's defeat laid waste to vast areas of the industrial north. By 2015 the 174 pits open at the start of the strike were all closed. Today the former mining communities are a by-word for unemployment, poverty, low wages and some of the highest COVID-19 death rates in the country.

Even more perverse than the storm of indignation over Johnson's comments from Tories and right-wingers such as former UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage, who complained that the prime minister showed a "fundamental misunderstanding of former mining communities".

In the 2018 general election, the Tories won seats in a number of these areas, leading to claims that it had breached the so-called "Red Wall" of historically Labour strongholds. The *Financial Times*, among others, warned that Johnson had "unleashed" Thatcher's "ghost... and frightened off potential voters," placing these gains in jeopardy.

Their real concern is that, in drawing attention to the miners' strike, Johnson had unwisely highlighted that the real divide in society is not over manufactured "culture wars", and pro or anti-Brexit, but class.

This also accounts for Labour's nervous response to Johnson's comment. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer said it was "shameful",

but was eager to move on. Trades Union Congress leader Frances O'Grady said nothing.

The miners' defeat was just as critical to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy as the Thatcher government. In response to the new economic orthodoxy, labour bureaucracies the world over abandoned their programmes of national economic reform and transformed themselves into the open instruments of the corporate-financial elite. The high point of this was the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1990.

Then Labour leader Neil Kinnock took every opportunity to attack the strike and worked to keep it isolated. Likewise, the TUC, having repudiated any opposition to the anti-union laws, began secret talks with the government and National Coal Board. On February 19, 1985, TUC leader Norman Willis met with Thatcher to present its sell-out agreement for a return to work. In a statement to parliament that day, Thatcher "expressed appreciation for the TUC's efforts", saying that its proposed settlement "was long overdue".

With the strike over, the TUC strengthened its corporatist relations with government and management, presiding over the most severe drop in wages and living standards since the 1930s. Kinnock gave way to Tony Blair, a gushing admirer of Thatcher. With little opposition, he set about remodelling Labour in her image, overturning Clause 4 of the party's constitution committing it to nationalisations and declaring "the class war is over."

In 2002, Thatcher was asked what her greatest political achievement was and replied, "Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds."

As for the "left", there has been no comment at all on Johnson's bilge from former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn or his shadow chancellor John McDonnell, nor their pseudo-left coterie.

The role of these forces in the miners' defeat was politically key. There was widespread anger and hostility among miners and the working class over the strikebreaking role of Labour and the TUC, symbolised by the noose that was slowly lowered over Willis's head at a meeting of South Wales miners.

But the "left" covered for the refusal of National Union of Mineworkers leader Arthur Scargill to make an explicit call for workers to defy the Labour and trade union bureaucrats and come out in solidarity with the miners. They have spent the subsequent four decades insisting that the working class no longer exists or is one other "identity" among many others and divided by race, gender or sexual orientation, while insisting that Labour and the trade unions can be reformed.

Their recent efforts to this end during Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party between 2015-2020 ended pathetically in a complete rout at the hands of the right. In the opening weeks of the global pandemic, knowing that Johnson was intent on letting COVID-19 rip, Corbyn meekly handed over leadership to Starmer and slithered off to the party's back-benches before he was suspended for politely questioning the overblown claims of anti-Semitism made by the Blairites to justify the witch-hunting of his supporters out of the party.

These layers are hostile to class struggle and do not want to be reminded of it. Their standpoint was summed up by Ellie Mae O'Hagan, director of the trade-union funded "left" thinktank,

Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS). Writing in the *Guardian*, she opined that Johnson was trying to "pick a fight with the left" and that she would not use her column to "argue" about what Thatcher "did to mining communities in the 1980s", because it was a "deliberate distraction" from the government's "plans for transitioning away from fossil fuels".

The nervousness that greeted Johnson's remark speaks to the fear in ruling circles that they are living on borrowed time. For all the triumphalism and one-sided class war of the last 40 years, they have squandered their advantage in an orgy of self-enrichment that has produced record levels of social inequality. More fundamentally, they have used up their political reserves through the discrediting of the labour bureaucracy and their apologists, on which they have long depended to police the working class.

Analysing the implications of the globalisation of production and economic life in 1988, the International Committee of the Fourth International concluded, "It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only in form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the form of the class struggle must assume an international character."

This process is underway. From the metalworkers in Matamoros, Mexico, to the New River Valley strike of Volvo Trucks workers, the initial stages of the upsurge in the class struggle are taking the form of a global rank-and-file rebellion against the old bureaucracies.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), launched by the ICFI in April 2021, plays the central political and organisational role in encouraging and directing this development. Its programme for a common global offensive by workers to take power, expropriate the oligarchs and establish a socialist society must be taken up and actualised in the struggles now unfolding.



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