

# Former National Union of Mineworkers leader Arthur Scargill warns of state attacks on UK rail strike

Tony Robson  
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Arthur Scargill, the former leader of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), addressed a rally Saturday outside Sheffield railway station in support of the railworkers' strike.

The remarks made by Scargill in reference to 1984-5 miners strike raise issues of contemporary significance for the 40,000 striking rail workers and the entire working class.

The branding of miners as “the enemy within” by Margaret Thatcher has been reprised against rail workers by Boris Johnson's Conservative government, which is to enact legislation to allow agency workers to be used as scabs and to impose minimum service requirements during rail and other key industry strikes backed by fines of up to £1 million on trade union actions deemed illegal. The target is initially the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members who struck for three days last week. But there are around 3 million workers whose trade unions are facing demands for strikes to be called against the cost-of-living crisis.

The warning made by Scargill was direct: “It is not enough to have demonstrations. The state will attack you... I want to make clear that the trade union movement have a responsibility to understand it is not just RMT, or ASLEF, or TSSA. It's the whole movement that is under attack.”

The Socialist Equality Party has fundamental differences with Scargill, but his warning comes from someone who led a one year strike during which 180,000 miners and the NUM itself faced a brutal state orchestrated assault.

The miners, Scargill said, faced a “paramilitary police force”—with the Thatcher government establishing for the first time a de facto national police force so that

tens of thousands of officers could be deployed to attack pickets, lay siege to mining communities and herd scabs into work. This led to 20,000 injured or hospitalised, 13,000 arrested and 200 imprisoned and two killed on the picket lines.

The state apparatus also set up a scab union in Nottinghamshire, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, and sought to bankrupt the NUM through the sequestration of its assets. Scargill stated that, as someone arrested repeatedly and based on this history, he had earned “the right to say to trade unions and to trade union members—Don't just send messages of support, take decisions to take solidarity strike action in support of striking rail workers.”

The warnings of a state assault and the call for mass action should be taken seriously by every worker. But the fight against Tory plans to emulate Thatcher can only be waged in opposition to Scargill's own political evasions.

He was the only speaker at the rally to call for any such mobilisation against the government's well publicised plans. The fact that this came from a former union leader who is now 84 years of age and until recently had retired into semi-obscurity speaks volumes. It should be noted, moreover, that he did not say anything to directly contradict RMT leader Mick Lynch's repeated insistence that the rail strike is a normal industrial dispute.

The “trade union movement” to which Scargill refers was, along with the Labour Party, responsible for the isolation and defeat of the miners in 1985. And they could only succeed in this goal because Scargill's perspective was limited to putting militant pressure on organisations that were intent on cutting the miners'

throats.

In the aftermath of the strike, the TUC and Labour Party utilised this defeat as a platform for an unprecedented lurch to the right that saw the establishment of New Labour as a Thatcherite entity and a near 40-year series of unbroken series of betrayals and suppression of industrial action as the bureaucracy refashioned themselves as extended arms of management and the corporations.

To repeat calls directed against this same bureaucracy today to wage the fight against the state, rather than warn workers as to the character of the trade unions and urge a mobilisation against them, is politically criminal. He was also noticeably silent regarding the Labour Party's declared opposition to the strike, despite having broken from the party over 25 years ago to set up his personalist Socialist Labour Party.

But Scargill was, after all, speaking on a TUC platform, and he remains a loyal representative of the bureaucracy whatever else he says. The rallies organised by the trade unions over the weekend, in collaboration with a dwindling number of Labourites, were designed to pre-empt mass action against the Johnson government. The hashtag promoted on Twitter was #ToryRailStrikes, summing up their own repudiation of the national strike action.

Olivia Blake, Labour MP for the local Hallam constituency, was afforded a fawning welcome. Blake last week resigned from the Labour's front bench, citing personal reasons. In line with the decree from Starmer that Labour frontbenchers were forbidden from setting foot on a railworkers picket line, Shadow Transport Secretary Louise Haigh, MP for Heeley, Sheffield, gave the event a wide birth. Blake said nothing to oppose Starmer.

Gaz Jackson, RMT regional organiser for Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, began his remarks by citing the fact that it was only 101 days since the mass sacking of 800 P&O Ferry workers. He warned that "ultimately if we are not careful and we don't fight this our members will end up in the same boat, our members will be fired and rehired on worse terms and conditions."

But it was the RMT that ensured that there was no solidarity action mobilised in opposition to P&O, by mounting a nationalist campaign for the Johnson government to stand up for "British workers", backed by the Labour Party. In similar fashion, Jackson

repeated the duplicitous line of the RMT that "the keys to unlock the door in this dispute is to guarantee job security". This is not a call to defend every job threatened, but for Network Rail and the train operating companies to work with the union to organise the job cull through voluntary redundancies. The RMT's call on the government to "unshackle the rail operating companies" so it can call off the dispute and negotiate a sell-out deal is to advance this corporatist agenda of union/management collusion.

The mass action required to defeat the Johnson government and the employers demands that workers take their struggles out of the hands of the trade unions, including their "left" representatives who specialise in empty rhetoric while blocking every expression of independent workers' resistance. As the SEP statement explains:

"The ruling class wants to finish the job Thatcher began in 1984, when she set out to break the miners to end all opposition to her social counterrevolution. The working class must seize the opportunity to revenge that defeat and reverse the decades of betrayals and losses that followed."

The fight against the Johnson government is developing as part of an international upsurge of the working class. To coordinate and guide these struggles requires the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to overcome all sectional and national divisions and bring to bear the full social force of the working class globally in a fight against capitalism.



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