

The lessons of the 1984-5 miners' strike for the UK rail strikes

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26 June 2022

The UK national rail strike has prompted constant references to the 1984-5 miners' strike against the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. There is an understanding among workers that Johnson's government is seeking to emulate Thatcher in inflicting a crushing defeat on the rail workers, to intimidate millions of other workers straining for a fight.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is reposting an essay first published in 2004, "20 years since the year-long miners' strike", to assist the workers in every sector now coming into struggle to understand the central lessons to be drawn from that heroic struggle.

There are, the essay explains, "two camps" into which reflections on the miners' strike generally fall. On the one hand, "those claiming that the defeat of the miners' strike was inevitable, because theirs was a lost cause waged by yesterday's men... This is the view of both the pro-Conservative and pro-Labour media."

On the other, "there are those on the left of the Labour Party or in various smaller left groups who look back wistfully at the events of 1984, point to certain mistakes that were made, but essentially regard it as a 'glorious' episode and a template for the class struggle in the future."

Both are false.

The miners' strike was defeated by the treachery of the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which was not challenged by National Union of Mineworkers President (NUM) Arthur Scargill. While Labour and the TUC refused to mobilise the wider working class in the miners' support, Scargill confined miners to a programme of militant action that would supposedly either circumvent the isolation of the strike or pressurise the bureaucracy into action.

Scargill's perspective was rooted in his advocacy of maintaining a national and state-protected industry under the "Plan for Coal". But sweeping changes in the world economy associated with the globalisation of production had rendered bankrupt all such protectionist strategies, along with the national reformism policies on which Labour and the unions were historically based. They responded by abandoning that programme and adopting an increasingly open pro-corporate politics, serving as partners of the employers.

The miners' strike proved at an early stage the necessity of waging the class struggle on a new, socialist and internationalist perspective and the building of new rank-and-file organisations of class struggle and a new socialist and internationalist leadership.

Britain: 20 years since the year-long miners' strike

The year-long miners' strike of 1984-85 was a watershed in political life in Britain. The worst single defeat suffered by the working class in the

post-war period, its results continue to resonate to this day.

There has been no shortage of documentaries and articles marking the 20th anniversary. But none of these have made a serious attempt to examine the central lessons to be drawn. Generally, they have fallen into one of two camps:

Firstly, there are those claiming that the defeat of the miners' strike was inevitable because theirs was a lost cause waged by yesterday's men. The argument essentially runs that the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, though at times autocratic and arrogant, represented the wave of the future. It was intent on modernising the British economy by curbing the power of the unions, which acted as a bastion of outmoded working practices that were "holding the country to ransom". Naturally one may have sympathy for the fate of individual miners, but this should be put in perspective. For what took place subsequently was a consumer boom and the development of the new economy based on deregulation and private capital which even the Labour government has now embraced. This is the view of both the pro-Conservative and pro-Labour media.

Secondly, there are those on the left of the Labour Party or in various smaller left groups who look back wistfully at the events of 1984, point to certain mistakes that were made, but essentially regard it as a "glorious" episode and a template for the class struggle in the future.

The apparent strength of the former argument is that it appears to have been confirmed by events. As the web site dedicated to Margaret Thatcher proclaims, "The year-long miners strike of 1984 is regarded as the last gasp of the old union order; since that year Britain has not experienced any major industrial conflicts."

This cannot be answered by those who refuse to seriously address the causes of a defeat that has ensured the ascendancy of right-wing political and economic nostrums for two decades and for which working people have paid such a bitter price.

For the miners themselves the impact of the strike's defeat has been devastating. There were 170 pits in the UK when the strike began, employing over 181,000 men and producing 90 million tonnes of coal. Today there are 15 pits employing around 6,500 men. Around 3,000 more are employed in surface mining. Areas once defined by their connection with mining such as Durham and Lancashire now have no pits. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has been reduced to a rump with a few thousand members who are still working in the industry.

The suffering of the miners during the strike was on a scale almost without precedent. Some 20,000 miners were injured or hospitalised, 13,000 arrested, 200 imprisoned, two were killed on picket lines, three died digging for coal during the winter, and 966 were sacked.

The miners faced brutal attacks by the police, who utilised techniques of suppression never seen before in mainland Britain. Mounted officers charged at pickets and through the streets of mining communities. A national task force was created of heavily armoured riot police, which was used to mount military style attacks. Miners were prevented from freely moving around the country, and special courts were created to deal with

the large numbers of arrests made.

A legal attack was waged against the NUM, during which there were repeated efforts to sequester its assets. Powerful business interests and elements within the state combined to organise a massive strike-breaking operation that culminated in the establishment of a scab union, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers.

What happened after the strike's defeat was worse. Once pits closed whole communities were plunged into desperate poverty. Many young people were forced to leave in search of work and, of those who stayed, reports estimate that one in three households are affected by problems of serious drug addiction.

Any regeneration efforts attempted in former mining areas have been shaped by the character of today's economy, with its domination by transnational corporations seeking access to cheap labour and extensive tax breaks. Consequently, according to the Coalfields Community organisation, "Companies are able to recruit rigorously and selectively to build up workforces of people willing to work flexibly for low wages, frequently in non-unionised workplaces. Work is often part-time and sometimes temporary when factories close soon after opening."

More generally, the defeat of the miners became the signal for the final abandonment by the trade unions and the Labour Party of any defence of the social interests of the working class. There were other strikes, of course, but nothing of equivalent magnitude. In the 1970s the highest number of days lost through industrial disputes was 29.4 million—during the "Winter of Discontent" of 1979. But the average number of days lost each year in that decade was still 12.9 million. In the 1980s the average was 7.2 million, but this figure is distorted by counting in the number of days lost as a result of the miners' strike itself, with 27 million working days lost in that year alone.

During the following decade, however, the average number of working days lost each year was just 660,000, with 1998 recording the lowest ever figure of 235,000 in just 205 stoppages, compared with 1,221 in 1984.

Trade union membership is now less than seven million, compared with over 11 million in 1984. In the private sector less than 19 percent of workers belong to a union and less than one-fifth of all 18-29 year olds are union members. This drops to around 10 percent in the private sector.

Even this does not begin to address the full impact on the ability of the working class to successfully combat the employers. For the unions today function essentially as a police force on behalf of management, as opposed to defensive organisations on behalf of their members.

Throughout Thatcher's terms in office and that of her successor John Major, the unions did nothing to oppose an unprecedented shift in wealth from the poor to the rich. And when Labour came to power in 1997 under Tony Blair, it continued Thatcher's pro-business policies with the full collaboration of the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

Within the first two years of Labour taking office, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population recorded their highest share of national income since 1988, at the height of Thatcher's rule. Income inequality today is even higher than it was under Thatcher.

As for the impact on working conditions, this can be judged from the fact that by 2002 the number of working days lost due to stress-related illness had risen to 33 million, up from 18 million in 1995, and was fully 60 times the number of days lost due to industrial action (550,000).

Thus, an examination of the miners' strike is not simply an issue of historical interest, but one of contemporary significance.

The scale of Thatcher's victory in 1984 cannot be understood without reference to the years that preceded it. Indeed, the year-long strike is popularly portrayed as the outcome of a fight between two giant egos—Thatcher and NUM President Arthur Scargill—each out to finally settle a conflict that first began in 1972—which saw mass picketing organised by Scargill at Saltley Gate coke depot and the miners secure a 27 percent pay rise—and most significantly in 1974. The miners' strike of

that year, at which time Scargill was NUM Yorkshire president, had forced the Conservative government of Edward Heath to pose the question "who rules the country, the government or the unions?" In the end, his government was forced to quit office and give way to a minority Labour government.

Thatcher's ascendancy into the leadership of the Conservatives was as the head of a right-wing cabal fired by the belief that Heath should have never retreated in the face of what she subsequently described as "the enemy within"—the miners and the working class. But this shift within the Tory Party was bound up with more fundamental economic and political processes.

The bringing down of the Heath government took place at a time of a systemic crisis for the capitalist class on a world scale. The years between 1968-75 saw a series of class struggles, often of revolutionary proportions, as a result of an international economic crisis epitomised by the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of dollar-gold convertibility.

The ruling class survived this tumultuous period, but profit rates continued to decline. As a result, the dominant sections of the bourgeoisie concluded that only a major offensive against the working class and the complex system of concessions embodied in the welfare state could rescue the capitalist system. Thatcher, together with President Ronald Reagan in the United States, embodied this political shift away from policies of class compromise towards direct class confrontation.

Thatcher represented the ascendancy of powerful new forces. The major corporations had 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. Under the banner of "rolling back the frontiers of the state," Thatcher was dedicated to such an economic and social reorganisation of Britain in order to make it globally competitive. This included the "rationalisation" (gutting) and/or privatisation of previously nationalised industries so as to slash taxes while opening key areas of the economy to corporate investors.

After 1974 the Conservatives spent five years in opposition preparing a major offensive against the working class. Just prior to Thatcher's coming into office in 1979, a report was prepared by Nicholas Ridley detailing a plan to defeat the miners in the event of another industrial conflict, including the organisation of a "large, mobile squad of police, equipped and prepared to uphold the law against violent picketing."

Scargill also saw the early 1970s as providing the essential framework for the 1984-85 strike, but unlike Thatcher, from the standpoint of repeating what he saw as a heroic success.

Far from being the revolutionary of popular right-wing mythology, Scargill is a life-long supporter of the Stalinist Communist Party and an advocate of its national reformist programme. To the extent that he spoke of socialism, it was as a perspective for the distant future. In the meantime, what was required was the creation of a nationally regulated economy based on a mix of import controls and subsidies that would provide the basis for protecting Britain's nationalised coal industry. This was the "Plan for Coal" that he sought to commit the Labour Party and the TUC to fight for in a struggle against the Conservatives. What was demonstrated in 1984, however, was not only that the ruling class was no longer prepared to tolerate such a policy, but that there was no longer any significant constituency for such a programme within the labour bureaucracy of which he was a part.

The same processes that had given rise to Thatcherism had already undermined the Labour Party's national reformist programme. Historically, the Labour Party and the trade unions had advocated a piecemeal struggle to secure concessions from the employers and social reforms through parliament. The bureaucracy did so not out of a genuine belief that this was the eventual road to socialism, but in order to

safeguard the profit system on which their privileged existence depended from revolutionary challenge by the working class. Their fundamental loyalty was always to the preservation of the bourgeois order, but they could successfully argue that this was compatible with the provision of higher wages, better working conditions and access to free health care and education.

The globalisation of production that took place from the mid-seventies and which accelerated in the 1980s had rendered this national reformist policy bankrupt. The reorganisation of every aspect of economic life—production, distribution and exchange—on an international scale was incompatible with Labour’s traditional efforts to maintain a social and political consensus between the classes. Instead, the Labour government that the miners helped to bring to power in 1974 had implemented austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund and imposed wage restraint. In this way the Labour Party first gave the bourgeoisie vital breathing space to prepare a counteroffensive against the working class and then paved the way for what was to be 18 years of Conservative rule.

At no point did the TUC offer any alternative to the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and then James Callaghan. It merely demanded a slight change in course. As a result, one of the most intensive periods of industrial conflict ever—the Winter of Discontent of 1979—actually succeeded in bringing to power the most right-wing government seen to that point in Britain.

Not only did Scargill’s perspective cover over the role played by Labour and the TUC in preparing the way for Thatcher, it offered no way of combating the continued shift to the right by the bureaucracy. After Thatcher had secured her second election victory in 1983, the right-wing leadership of the Labour Party had concluded that it was necessary to adapt wholesale to the new economic and political orthodoxy dictated by the bourgeoisie. For its part, the TUC, having isolated and betrayed every struggle against the government, abandoned even its formal opposition to the anti-union laws.

Thus, the dominant sections of the Labour bureaucracy were utterly opposed to any mobilisation of the working class against the government. Yet the perspective of Scargill, the Labour Party’s left wing and Britain’s various radical groups was limited to the encouragement of a militant movement within the trade unions to pressurise Labour and the TUC into taking such a stand. What they would not contemplate was the development of any movement that threatened a political break from the bureaucracy.

This was to prove decisive in the defeat of the miners’ strike. As the TUC’s own official history tellingly explains: “In the early 1980s, a policy of active opposition to the anti-union laws was won at the TUC, with activists hoping to repeat the successful (though often unofficial) movement against the industrial relations act of 1971.... [A]t crucial moments some unions, in a weak position, looked to the TUC General Council to organise support action but this was never going to happen. TUC General Secretaries (Len Murray, 1973-84 and Norman Willis, 1984-93) were not going to risk the TUC directly breaking the law (however distasteful that law was).”

The strike began on March 5, 1984, and was to end on that same day a year later, though Kent miners and some in Yorkshire stayed out for a few more days in protest. The immediate spark for the strike was the announced closure of Cortonwood colliery, but this was only the initial target of a government intent on closing all unprofitable pits and privatising those that remained. In opposition, Scargill called for the closure of pits to take place only on the grounds of exhaustion and for the preservation of a nationalised and subsidised industry.

Throughout a year of bitter struggle, the actions of the TUC and the Labour leadership were dedicated to isolating the miners and ensuring that the substantial support that existed within the working class was not

mobilised against the government.

Solidarity action was mostly limited to raising money and food as the strike dragged on. (Around £60 million was raised—a testament to the strength of support for the miners’ fight.) Partial and unofficial blocks on the movement of coal were imposed by railwaymen, dockers and lorry drivers, but official secondary supportive strike action was opposed by the TUC unions. Strikes by dockworkers broke out twice as a result of efforts to break their embargo on moving coal, but were speedily called off by the union leaders. And a strike by overseers known as pit deputies was called off on the basis of a rotten compromise. It should be noted that without the deputies, no pit could work and the concerted campaign by the Tories and the police to encourage scabbing would have come to nothing.

Scargill and his supporters took an ambivalent attitude to the TUC and the Labour Party. Initially, they sought to keep them at arm’s length, arguing that this would prevent them from being in a position to sell out the strike. On March 16, the NUM sent a secret letter to the TUC explicitly stating, “No request is being made by this union for the intervention or assistance of the TUC.”

But Scargill’s efforts to “galvanise” the labour movement by a display of mass picketing at the Orgreave Coke works near Sheffield in May and June were a disaster. It merely allowed thousands of riot police to wade into miners dressed only in jeans and t-shirts, and to make hundreds of arrests and seriously injure dozens more—including Scargill himself.

In the latter months of the strike, Scargill and the NUM were forced to repeatedly take part in negotiations with the National Coal Board set up by the TUC.

The NUM leader was in an unrivalled position from which to challenge the TUC and Labour bureaucracy, should he have chosen to do so. Had he made an explicit call to the working class to defy their leaders and come out in support of the miners, there is no doubt he would have met a powerful response. Instead, he kept his members out in an increasingly futile campaign before accepting defeat without securing a single concession from the government and the National Coal Board.

Though Scargill enjoyed considerable standing amongst the more militant sections of the working class and was viewed as a principled alternative to the likes of Labour leader Neil Kinnock, his leadership would not have remained unchallenged throughout months of terrible hardship had it not been for the crucial support he was given by the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP).

At the time, the WRP was the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), but had long since begun to abandon a revolutionary perspective in favour of a capitulation to the bureaucratic leaderships of the workers’ movement.

Its adaptation to Scargill was one of the most grotesque expressions of this protracted political degeneration. The WRP’s role is analysed in the ICFI statement, “How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism 1973-85”:

“During a struggle that lasted for one year, the WRP never once placed a single demand on the mass political organisation of the working class—the Labour Party. It never issued a call for the mobilisation of the working class to force the resignation of the Tory government, new elections and the return of the Labour Party to power on a socialist programme...”

“For all its left-sounding rhetoric, the line of the WRP throughout the miners’ strike conveniently enabled the [WRP leader Gerry] Healy clique to avoid any conflict with its opportunist friends in the Labour Party and with the Scargill leadership of the NUM. For all the talk of a revolutionary situation, the WRP leaders consciously ruled out any criticism of Scargill—thus exposing the fact that their own call for a general

strike was utterly hollow.”

The ICFI statement continues,

“In the situation which existed in 1984, the central demand to bring the Tories down and return the Labourites to power on socialist policies would have had a powerful impact upon the mass movement, and created the conditions for the exposure of the Labourites. In so far as the Labourites, including and above all the Lefts, refused to support this demand and fight for it their credibility within the working class would be shattered. On the other hand, if despite the sabotage of the Social Democrats, the Tories were forced to resign (or, for that matter, attempted to remain in power in the face of mass popular opposition), a pre-revolutionary situation could have emerged in Britain....

“The campaign for a general strike could only develop in a political struggle within the working class against this objectively reactionary line. It would have entailed an uncompromising day-to-day battle against Scargill’s centrist politics, a clear analysis of the limitations of syndicalism, the exposure of Scargill’s ties to the Stalinists, and an unequivocal denunciation of his refusal to fight for the immediate bringing down of the Tories. Only along these lines could the WRP have built up within miners and the working class as a whole the **political** consciousness necessary for the general strike.”

In the final analysis, it was the refusal of the WRP to wage a principled struggle against Scargill that disarmed the many thousands of workers who looked to it for a lead, and thereby ensured the strike’s defeat.

The necessity to develop a *political consciousness*—that is, a genuine socialist consciousness—in the working class remains the essential lesson that must be drawn from the miners’ strike.

The strike was a seminal experience for a generation of workers, but it is one that has still to be digested and understood.

It is a feature of the strike that despite the suffering it caused, it generally strengthened bonds of friendship and family. Even its critics are forced to acknowledge, for example, the essential role played by women in the strike and how this challenged preconceptions in what was undoubtedly hitherto very male-dominated communities. In the strike’s aftermath, however, communities were torn apart and many families split up. This cannot be understood simply as the result of a defeat, however terrible. It suggests the personal pressures created because so few of the strike’s participants understood why they had been defeated despite their heroism and sacrifice and were able to conceive of a way forward.

Thatcher won the strike not because of any inherent strength, but because of the rottenness of her political opponents. And though it was portrayed at the time as the high point of industrial militancy, it turned out to be its last hurrah. By 1984, the old organisations of the working class were already in an advanced state of decay. And the perspective of national reformism on which they were based could no longer provide the means through which the working class could defend any of its past gains, let alone offer the means to make fresh advances.

Tony Blair and New Labour are not in that sense a break from the history of the workers’ movement, but the product of its most negative features—its ideological subordination to the bourgeoisie and the profit system.

The miners’ strike posed the necessity for the working class to break both organisationally and politically from the programme of social reformism and to develop new organisations and methods of struggle

based upon the revolutionary internationalist perspective of Marxism—in opposition to which Labourism had developed.

But at the time, even the most steadfast and principled sections of miners and the working class generally believed that militant action alone would be enough to stiffen the resolve of their leaders and ensure victory. They paid a heavy price for such illusions.

At first glance, it would appear that little that was progressive emerged from the miners’ strike. Certainly, it had the effect of tightening the grip of a corrupt clique on the workers’ movement, using the defeat to proclaim the end of the class struggle in order to impose its own right-wing policies.

There is an extremely limited character to such a victory, however.

The last 20 years have seen changes of such magnitude that they have turned previous assumptions upside down. In the process, it is not merely the old perspective of social reformism that has been discredited. The alternatives offered by the right wing have been exposed in far less time. Thatcher’s “popular capitalism” proved to be a recipe for societal breakdown, and the repackaged version offered by Blair, the so-called “Third Way,” has proved to be no less disastrous.

The most discredited of political notions, however, is the idea that the Labour Party in any way represents a political alternative for working people. The ideological conquest of the old workers’ movement by overt champions of the profit system and the transformation of the Labour Party and the trade unions into adjuncts of big business are so complete that they can no longer hold the allegiance of the broad mass of the working class.

On every issue relating to its social and democratic rights, the working class today finds itself in direct confrontation with its old organisations. This found its most finished expression in the mass mobilisations against the Iraq war, where popular hostility to Blair’s pro-business agenda fed into opposition to an unprovoked and criminal attack on a defenceless country.

The class struggle is far from over. Rather, the anti-war movement indicates that in the next period it will not be confined within the old structures and must take on the character of a political rebellion against the trade union and labour bureaucracy. In preparing the ground for such a development, an examination of the central lessons of the miners’ strike is of vital importance.



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