

Veterans of 1984-85 UK miners' strike mark 40th anniversary with march and rally

Our reporters
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On Saturday, hundreds of former miners and their families marked the 40th Anniversary of the 1984-85 British miners' strike, with a march and rally in South Yorkshire, England.

The Hatfield Miners' Strike Parade assembled at the Broadway Hotel in Dunscoft, near Doncaster, and marched along Station Road, East Lane and Waggon Way to the former Hatfield Colliery. The march, led off by the Doncaster & District, & East Yorkshire Pipe Band, and the Armthorpe Elmfield Brass Band, was greeted along the way.

Under the shadow of the rusting headgear and remains of buildings at the Hatfield pit, miners commemorated the strike and held a minutes' silence for miners who were no longer alive. Hatfield was closed by British Coal in 1993, one of many pits shut in the years that followed the strike's defeat. It was reopened in 1994 by a team from the pit's management, as the Hatfield Coal Company Ltd, before closing again in 2001 as unprofitable. Private operator Richard Budge restarted coal production in 2007, but the pit finally closed in 2015, along with two remaining pits, Kellingley Colliery in Yorkshire and Thoresby in Nottinghamshire—marking the end of deep coal mining in the UK.

The parade proceeded to the nearby Hatfield Pit Club in Stainforth, where a rally was addressed by former National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) President Arthur Scargill who led the union during the 1984-85 strike.

In a speech lasting almost an hour, Scargill detailed the main events during the strike, noting that at every key juncture it “could have been won” were it not for the sabotage by right-wing sections of the NUM leadership and the leaders of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS).

Scargill explained that NACODS members had voted to strike by an 80 percent majority based on a joint agreement with the NUM. This would have led to every

pit in the country being forced to close—including those in Nottinghamshire kept open by scab labour. However, said Scargill, two days before a meeting arranged at conciliation service ACAS to settle the dispute, “NACODS told us they had changed their mind... and to this day I've never had an answer... No explanation has ever been given as to why NACODS performed this sellout, which has terrible consequences, which led to the destruction of the whole of Britain's deep mine coal industry.”

Scargill made similar remarks throughout his speech regarding the response of NUM areas leaders to police attacks on pickets, and later on their ending the strike—insisting their sabotage was inexplicable and only hinting at their actions reflecting the interests of British Coal and the Tories.

The fact is that for 40 years, Scargill himself has offered no explanation of such behaviour, because this concerns the pivotal question of leadership and programme which led to the defeat of the miners.

To give a truthful account of the strike would require that Scargill address the sabotage of the strike not just by NUM areas and NACODS but by the entire trade union bureaucracy, led by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which left miners to fight alone for an entire year. And he would have to address the role of the Labour Party, whose leader Neil Kinnock was a notorious opponent of the strike.

Recalling the Battle of Orgreave coking works in the summer of 1984, he said all that was required was more mass picketing and to continue fighting the police to a standstill. Scargill himself was arrested and beaten at Orgreave, requiring hospitalisation.

The events at Orgreave said Scargill, “were almost a replica of what had happened all those years before a Saltley Gate”, a reference to the mass mobilisation of the working class in Birmingham that closed a fuel storage

depot which led to victory in the 1972 miners' strike. "But instead of repeating that by bringing more pickets as I urged from my hospital bed, the [NUM] areas for some reason didn't do it.... I've no doubt in my mind that if Orgreave had stayed closed, the strike would have been over."

Scargill, then and now, proceeds on the assumption that the strike's isolation by the TUC and Labour Party could have been overcome by a repeat of the trade union militancy that led to the fall of the Heath Conservative government in 1974.

The Socialist Equality Party attended the parade in Yorkshire, with a new pamphlet, *The Lessons of the 1984-85 miners' strike*, which explains the real lessons to be drawn from the miners' courageous fight.

The pamphlet's introduction places the strike's defeat in the framework of "a major shift in economic organisation, with an aggressive turn by the major corporations to global investment and internationalised production," noting that globalisation "demanded the deregulation of the economies of the advanced industrial countries, the slashing of tax rates, destruction of welfare provision and a massive increase in the exploitation of the working class in the drive to become internationally competitive and secure a share of world markets."

It was the impact of globalisation that produced the wholesale abandonment by the nationally-based labour organisations of their old reformist programmes and their transformation into corporatist adjuncts of the transnational companies and national governments:

"Scargill fought the strike based on a national reformist programme. He sought to force a defeat on the Thatcher government solely by militant trade union action and to then convince the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (TUC) to implement a national 'Plan for Coal.'

"Instead, the miners were faced with a political struggle against the state and every instrument at its disposal, led by a government determined to crush 'the enemy within' at all costs, and the deliberate and systematic isolation and sabotage of their struggle by the trade unions and the Labour Party.

The foundations for the complete transformation of the trade unions into partners of the corporations and state, and of the Labour Party into an avowed defender of free market capitalism under Tony Blair, began with the crushing of working-class resistance in the miners' strike. "This defeat inaugurated a decades-long and historically unprecedented decline in industrial action and the living standards of the working class."

The pamphlet's introduction insists: "Four decades ago, the miners' strike proved the necessity of waging the class struggle based on a worldwide strategy through the building of rank-and-file organisations of class struggle and a new socialist and internationalist leadership in the working class."

Strike veterans and their supporters responded enthusiastically to the pamphlet seeking to draw the lessons from their strike, with over 120 copies sold, along with other publications from the SEP's literature stall including copies of the new book by David North, *The Logic of Zionism: From Nationalist Myth to the Gaza Genocide* and the New Year 2024 Statement of the WSWs International Editorial Board, *The Working Class, the Fight Against Capitalist Barbarism, and the Building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution*.

In Barnsley, over 200 people including ex-miners attended the annual memorial lecture for David Jones and Joe Green, two miners who were killed during the 1984/85 strike. The annual lecture takes place at the NUM headquarters, with the majority of those in attendance union bureaucrats.

The main speakers, Labour councillor James Michael Stowe and Sharon Graham, the UNITE general secretary, both called for a Labour government and made no criticism of party leader Sir Keir Starmer or the presence of war mongers Dan Jarvis MP, who was on the platform, and John Healey, the Shadow Defence Secretary.

The SEP's new pamphlet insists: "It is essential that the working class, especially its younger generation, is armed with the lessons of the 1984-85 miners' strike. This will immeasurably strengthen them in the life-and-death conflicts they face and in building the revolutionary leadership they must have."

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