

Veteran of 1984-5 UK Miners' Strike

Malcolm Bray speaks on its lessons and the fight to build a socialist leadership in the working class

Our correspondent
13 March 2024

Malcolm Bray was a miner at Woolley colliery in the Yorkshire coalfields during the year-long 1984-85 strike. The WSWs spoke to him about his experiences and the political lessons he drew from the heroic fight and its betrayal. Malcolm was convinced of the necessity to build a new party of the working class based on the principles of Trotskyism and international socialism.

I started mining life at Woolley colliery at the young age of 21 in 1979. I was married with two young children at the time. I now have three. Before that I was in the army for just over three years, serving in Ireland and Hong Kong. It was hard at the time to find a decent job until I was offered a job in the mines. I did my mining training at Grimethorpe colliery and later at Woolley colliery, where I worked until its closure in 1987. This came as a shock to us considering millions were spent on upgrading Woolley and produced a knock-on effect to other pits in the area it was linked to. It refuted the excuse of only closing the pits through exhaustion. The pit was demolished in the early 1990s and is now the home to a posh new housing estate called Woolley Grange.

I did not have much previous experience with industrial action other than a strike at Needham Brothers and Brown, an engineering firm in Barnsley I worked for between 1973 and 1979, which made the pulley wheels for the pit head gear. I was very young at the time—it was sit-down action and the police were called in. At the start of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike I remember being very excited. In our view this was long overdue. We were ready for a fight, but we did not have a clue how long this would go on for and what we were going to face.

Some of the older miners had been involved in the 1972 Miners' Strike when mass picketing closed down Saltley Gate coking depot in Birmingham, winning a pay increase against the Conservative government of Ted Heath. This was

entirely different as it was a fight for our jobs, communities, and the future of the entire industry. The criminals who drew up the Ridley Report to privatise industries, stockpile coal, organise a scab herding operation and mobilise a national police force against flying pickets were far better prepared than we were.

I was involved every single day, mainly picketing my own pit with my brother and two other workmates. Then I got more involved with flying picketing and a go-slow cavalcade on the M1 motorway to stop traffic. I was arrested in Nottinghamshire for picketing and fined £200 for obstruction. We were often reliant on the soup kitchen to get at least one square meal a day. I was never injured myself by the police, but I know many who were, including my National Union of Mineworkers' branch secretary Ralph Summerfield who was battered by the police so much that his clothing was soaked in blood.

Then came what became known as the Battle of Orgreave, the mass picket of a coking plant outside Rotherham three months into the strike, on June 18. This was a total set-up by the police and thousands of miners were led into a trap. We'd never seen as many police. We were faced with baton wielding police with shields and charges from police on horses. This went on for a number of days. It left us to ponder this was no ordinary dispute. We faced a lack of direction by NUM leader Arthur Scargill in the face of the full force of the state being brought down on us.

There was no victory in sight, but we still believed our action had stopped a lot of coal production and we had the upper hand. But faith in just militancy was giving way to broader political considerations. I remember many miners were angry with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party, who had no intention of mobilising the working class behind us against the Thatcher government. It was becoming apparent that financial donations and food

parcels were not enough. Neil Kinnock, the leader of the Labour Party, was despised by the miners along with all the other union bureaucrats who were isolating our fight. I remember the hangman's noose being lowered symbolically from the ceiling in front of TUC General Secretary Norman Willis when he spoke at a rally of South Wales miners.

It was towards the end of the strike I met the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) after getting a copy of the *News Line* on the picket line. I'd never joined any political organisation up to this point. Until then I knew nothing about Trotskyism and the fight against Stalinism, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the history of the real socialist movement.

I attended the Marxist School of Education and spoke at a national rally of the WRP at Alexander Palace in front of 3,000 workers and youth about the need for the education of the working class to develop its political consciousness. I travelled down with a coach load of striking miners and their wives in the Women Against Pit Closures. I was part of a group of miners who joined the WRP in Barnsley, Rotherham and Doncaster in south Yorkshire, one of the most militant areas in the country and the *News Line* was read up and down the coalfields nationally.

We saw this as offering an independent way forward. We were also very aware of international support from workers the world over in terms of food parcels from families across Europe. I had one from a family in Germany. But this was limited to the trade union version of "solidarity" based on organisations rooted in a national outlook rather than a common fight against the powerful globally organised corporations.

I would fully recommend the WSWs pamphlet, *The Lessons of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike*. The WRP as the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was the only political tendency which could have provided a lead, but unbeknownst to me it had undergone a political degeneration and a turn away from its Trotskyist principles.

I saw Scargill as a good solid left-wing leader who spoke well and I often got caught up with supporting him. As the pamphlet explains his authority rested on the fact that he was seen as a principled alternative to Kinnock and the TUC, but he avoided any struggle against their isolation of the strike and class treachery. The WRP supported him uncritically. In the course of a strike which lasted a year, his left credentials could have been exposed and workers brought forward to build a new leadership against the labour and trade union bureaucracy in the fight for socialism. The failure to do this meant a betrayal became a defeat.

I never understood this fully until 1986 and the expulsion of the WRP from the ICFI. It was then I became clearer on

Scargill and Mick McGahey and the Stalinist influence over the most powerful union in the country and the meaning of their call to return to the "Plan for Coal" to save the coal industry. This was not based on workers' control and socialism, but economic nationalism and a corporatist agreement with the government.

Despite my ill health I remain active on social media spreading the word and sharing articles from the WSWs. I have my own Facebook site, "Miners' Strike 1984-5", with a thousand followers and I am an admin on the Centenary of the Russian Revolution with four thousand followers. We must take every opportunity to reach an international audience. I was very pleased to be able to speak at an online meeting in New Zealand in June 2022 to launch the WSWs book exposing the cover-up of the Pike River mining disaster by a Labour government and the unions and the fight for the truth and justice taken up by the families.

For me the struggle continues and is no different for the working class in Britain as it is internationally, with workers having nothing to look forward to except more strife and the imminent danger of world war. All these questions from war, poverty, climate change affect us all, including the fight to free Julian Assange and end the terrible genocide that is taking place in Gaza.

While these questions remain, the class struggle continues. It will never end until the working class ends capitalism and establishes a socialist society.

Marking the 40th anniversary, the Socialist Equality Party has published a pamphlet, The Lessons of the 1984-85 miners' strike. Order your copy from Mehring Books here.



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