

Documenting and misrepresenting the 1984-85 British miners' strike

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For the fortieth anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike, Britain's leading serious broadcasters have both produced television documentaries. And both the BBC's *Miners' Strike: A Frontline Story* and Channel 4's *Miners' Strike 1984: The Battle for Britain* work to a right-wing political agenda.

Their overriding message is that the critical experience of class struggle in post-war Britain was essentially a tragic misunderstanding. However heroic and self-sacrificing the miners' actions over their year-long strike, the escalation was regrettable, and moderation could have ensured the industry's managed decline.

They pursue the line that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's destruction of the industry was brutal but corresponded with economic realities. National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) President Arthur Scargill, by contrast, was holding back this tide of history while waging a political struggle against the Conservative government counter to the interests of the miners.

The three-part Channel 4 series is directed by Tom Barrow, who previously worked on the documentary series *24 Hours in Police Custody*, like the BBC's producer Zac Beattie.

The first of Channel 4's three independent episodes focuses on Shirebrook in Derbyshire. This was a contested region during the strike, as its pits were not among those initially targeted for closure.

Barrow gives equal weight to the voices of strikers and scabs (dignified as "working miners"). The Shirebrook episode gives us our first sight of Roland Taylor, who played a politically calculated role in organising scabbing. Here he pleads contemptibly for "respect" for "following his beliefs."

But strikers and scabs did not have equal weight in the conflict, as the state's onslaught and promotion of strikebreaking demonstrated. The dispute was between the working class and the capitalist state. Scabs took a hostile class position.

Barrow's second episode deals with the attempted mass picket of Orgreave coking plant, which met with a brutal police attack. Workers were batoned and cavalry-charged by mounted officers. Police then launched a propaganda offensive claiming self-defence. Former miners told both programmes of their wariness towards the media which had circulated this campaign of distortion and lies.

The state escalated proceedings against 55 miners using the extremely serious charge of riot. The allegations and media misrepresentations were finally discredited in court using the police's own footage.

Barrow's last episode centres on David Hart, a right-wing adviser who urged Thatcher to crush the miners. He is presented as a maverick outsider who pushed a not-unwilling Thatcher further than she had initially intended.

This is propagandist nonsense. Hart was a virulently anti-communist millionaire, chosen as the go-between for Thatcher and National Coal Board president Ian McGregor to shield the Tories from charges that they were waging a political struggle to break the NUM and the miners. On the Tories' behalf, he bankrolled scabbing through his National Working Miners Committee (NWMC) and paid for the founding of the breakaway Union of Democratic Miners (UDM) following the strike's defeat.

Any suggestion that Thatcher's intervention only followed picket line violence is ludicrous. In 1979 Thatcher was already armed with the Ridley Plan to defeat any repeat of the miners' strikes that had ousted Edward Heath's Tory government in 1974. The government stockpiled coal for the confrontation, and Orgreave demonstrated their long preparation to use the full physical and legal power of the state against the miners.

Roland Taylor's interviews do show the state organisation of scabbing. For all the scabs' claims to be defending "democratic rights" within the NUM, Taylor is clear that Hart's NWMC was a government vehicle. Thatcher invited the Committee to dinner, which Taylor calls "maybe a thank you."

Presenting such a conflict as internecine, "pit against pit," requires ignoring the economic and political background to the strike. Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire were more profitable than the South Yorkshire, South Wales and Kent fields slated for closure. Nottinghamshire was historically the heartland of breakaway company unions for that reason.

There was an economic basis to the scabbing, and a political basis to the government's onslaught. That is why corporatist unions were used to undermine the strike, but their pits were also closed anyway.

Channel 4's focus on Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire is aimed at erasing those questions. NUM delegates from these areas repeatedly deny that this was (or should have been) any political uprising. Both programmes feature strikers, scabs and police officers, while Channel 4 also interview political advisers to Thatcher and journalists (including Anna Soubry, later a Tory MP herself).

In the guise of even-handed coverage, this advances the government's political lies and the filthy excuses of its agents and accomplices as good coin.

The desperate conditions experienced by strikers are shown, by the BBC particularly—when David Roper's week-old infant died, he was not eligible for a funeral grant because he was striking, and the child was buried in someone else's coffin—but are reduced to the tragically inevitable outcome of a political misjudgement.

The Channel 4 series was more naked in its platform for and justification for scabbing. The BBC's straightforward historical

narrative makes its testimony from strikers more valuable, but it shared the political line. A Nottinghamshire scab told interviewers that Scargill had wanted to bring down the government, as if this was a terrible thing.

We have well-documented differences with Scargill, centred on his refusal to politically challenge the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in favour of a reliance on mass picketing, reflecting his aim of convincing a future Labour government to implement a national “Plan for Coal”. But there is an unbridgeable gulf between political criticisms of him from the left and such apologies for the Tories, scabs and scab-herders.

This essence of both documentaries was summarised in *The Observer* by Tim Adams. Adams wrote that documentaries “are sometimes tempted to portray those clashes as part of a straightforward class war—workers against the capitalist state—but they were, on the ground, equally internecine conflicts, pit against pit.”

Spelling out the political alternative to this that he and the documentaries were advancing, Adams wrote of “watch[ing] voices for compromise quietly erased in favour of that simpler binary” of head-on conflict between the working class and the bourgeois state.

Whose omission is he lamenting? None other than then Labour leader Neil Kinnock, whom he calls “a rare voice of reason”!

Bitterly hostile to Scargill—earning him Adams’s support—Kinnock later dismissed as “sheer fantasy” any notion that he “could have transformed the conditions of the strike by ‘calling on workers,’ in [Scargill’s] phrase, to come out in support of the miners.” Adams restates the arguments of Kinnock and the NUM “moderates”, platformed extensively here, insisting that the strike’s weakness was the NUM’s failure to call a national ballot, rather than the isolation and betrayal of the strike by the Labour Party and the TUC.

Adams speaks for a layer whose real regret is that there was a militant strike at all. Kinnock led the witch-hunt of Labour’s lefts and smoothed Labour’s path to Tony Blair. He did very well out of it. He and wife Glenys pocketed £10 million in pay, allowances and pension entitlements during their period working at the European Union. Both were ennobled becoming peers in the House of Lords.

Adams’s article bore the bizarre title, “‘They didn’t understand us at all’: why the miners’ strike still captivates Britain, 40 years on.”

“Captivates” is an extraordinary word. A complacent middle class is savouring its disaster tourism in the brutalities of a class struggle it insists cannot be understood.

He invoked a 2022 BBC drama that embodied this political outlook. What was remarkable about *Sherwood* was that it used the license extended to dramatic presentation to produce a work of fiction almost wholly divorced from reality.

Based on the real-life 2005 murder of a former striker in a Nottinghamshire pit village, *Sherwood* tried to show the continued tensions and trauma in the community. Even more clumsily and ineptly than the documentaries, however, it presents everybody involved as a victim of forces outside of their control.

The murdered man’s family are still estranged from his scab brother next door. The local policeman leading the investigation was a young officer during the strike, while the outside officer now investigating the murder had also been sent from London on overtime to police the picket lines, where he began a relationship with a local woman. Another undercover police officer had not only begun a relationship in the village but stayed there ever since, continuing to hide their identity as a spy to do so.

The author, James Graham (b.1982), is from the area, but there is

nothing authentic in his script. His police officers plead for sympathy (“We were just kids!”). No, they were adults who knew exactly what they were doing and were well paid to brutalise striking miners and their families. One former officer told the BBC, “We were political pawns.” But this was a cold statement of fact, not the handwringing of *Sherwood*, where a former undercover officer commits suicide as details of his operation come to light.

The inquiry into undercover police agents in the British labour movement reveals they did have relationships and children with their victims. These were to facilitate their infiltration, not romantic, and the officers did not stick around.

For Graham, it is all an incomprehensible mess of personal tragedies. *Sherwood*’s climax makes his argument explicit. The murder victim’s widow declares: “A former mining town? How the hell are we to move on when we talk about ourselves in terms of what we aren’t any more? We’ve had 40 years of this. You get one bloody life and we are spending it hating. Aren’t you all tired? I am. So fucking tired...”

Graham is a prolific playwright, awarded an OBE [Order of the British Empire] for his efforts. He has shown a not particularly healthy interest in depicting backroom political negotiations and vote-wrangling. From this less than insightful position he has turned to the miners’ strike, concluding that we should put it all behind us.

But it is not all behind us. The defeat of the miners was the blunt end of the decades-long smashing up of work and social conditions that followed. Former miners faced long-term unemployment in communities devastated by pit closures while others could often only find low-paid jobs in the distribution warehouses that sprang up in their place.

But a new generation of workers is moving into struggle against brutal exploitation, the destruction of social services and democratic rights, and imperialist backing for the genocide in Gaza. And they will reject with contempt all such appeals to pessimism and political and social conformity advanced by sections of the complacent middle classes.

There is a telling moment in the BBC documentary. A miner’s daughter speaks of her embarrassment at a solidarity theatre performance by some Cambridge feminists. Her awkwardness is that it was misjudged, but also she recognises the sincerity of the solidarity and the idealism animating their efforts.

For Adams, however, this provides an opportunity for a cynical sneer: it is solidarity and idealism themselves that belong in the past. This is the product of the social conditions borne out of the defeat of the miners. The ruling class has enriched itself beyond measure, and layers of the upper middle class have become accustomed to considerable social comfort even as the working class has been under relentless assault.

These documentaries should be watched, but critically. The events they misrepresent need to be understood, although the documentaries cannot help there. Artists need to reject the smug limitations on display to be able to create anything of substance for the future. And they will no doubt do so.



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