

Striking workers speak from picket line at the National Coal Mining Museum for England:

“It’s our heritage. That’s what we’re fighting for. That means more to me than anything else”

Our reporters
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A *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporting team spoke to striking workers who are members of Unison on their picket line outside the National Coal Mining Museum for England (NCMME) in Wakefield, Yorkshire about their 5-month-long strike and distributed the article *UK National Coal Mining Museum management issues disciplinary threats against strikers*.

Two workers employed as underground guides at the museum gave interviews. Both had formerly worked as miners at the UK’s last remaining deep coal mine – Kellingley Colliery, before it was closed in 2015.

Trevor explained:

“The original offer was a pound an hour across the board, or 5 percent which ever was better. I mean, we’re on £12.83 an hour, which would’ve made it £13.83.” This is barely above the minimum wage which is uplifted to a meagre £12.71 an hour this April for workers aged 21 years and above.

“We’ve got a very, very skilled workforce here. We’ve got electricians, we’ve got fitters, we’ve got people that do numerous tasks. That [offer] was withdrawn, and just before we came out on strike, we’re offered eighty pence. We asked that the one pound an hour be reinstated. And then it went down to about 62 pence an hour!

“We had a meeting about six weeks into the strike with the management. Their offer was that the fitters and electricians receive a pound an hour and everybody else would be on the 62 pence, which we found ridiculous. The latest offer that we’ve had is 84 pence an hour. So we still thought that was a little bit derisory. That was across the board, of course, or 5 percent which is the highest. I mean, 5 percent of £12.62 is not a great deal of money. If you’re on £50,000, it would be a lot of money.

“Along with this latest offer there was also a threat of disciplinary action for people that have said things or done things on the picket line. When we did investigate it; apparently there had been two comments made on social media, not by any pickets or anything, but we understand that one of the pickets had put a thumbs up to one of the statements and another one that shared it. Sharing it doesn’t mean that you agree with it.

“You don’t go into negotiations with threats. So we don’t think that they’re acting in good faith, you know, we don’t think that they want to end this. It’s become a war of attrition.”

Asked to respond to management allegations of “abuse, harassment and extreme bullying” by those on strike, Trevor said, “Well, the bullying and the insults, that’s what we received because they [management] had a security company here originally and from day one, all they wanted to do was antagonise us to get a reaction. Yeah, provocation. We believe that they brought in a proper antagonist, you know, who stood there just called us every name under the sun. You’ve probably seen the videos. I just went up and said, “who are you?” You probably saw the reaction I got off him. I didn’t curse and swear at him. Yeah, we just asked who he was. We got abuse.

“He threatened us. He says, tomorrow I’ll have 100 people here. He said, basically they will knock us off the picket line. Well, he didn’t come the next day.”

A veteran of the 1984-85 Miners’ strike, when the full force of the British state was employed to smash the miners’ struggle and the media regularly vilified them, Trevor recounted the series of horrendous provocations employed by management against the pickets.

The security firm used predominantly south Asian staff and opposition to their provocations was initially attempted to be branded as racist, which Trevor explained was definitely not the case ; “From day one, everybody said, be very, very careful what you say here, because the wrong word and it’s going to be taken out of context. They were looking for any way they could pin that racist tag on to us.”

When this did not work, security guards tried to turn members of the public against the strikers by even resorting to accusations of paedophilia.

“You might have seen it on social media, where they were telling women with kids, [visiting the museum] be careful with your kids. These are paedophiles. We found that abhorrent. I went up to them and I said, ‘Who on this picket line is a paedophile?’

Security personnel then set about physically assaulting the strikers.

“The next thing we know, a car turned up, and we think it was some of the security family members that got out. They began pushing the pickets around. And little Sue, they actually manhandled her. They knocked her out of the way which is basically assault. The bullying was against us.”

Trevor recounted how he had narrowly avoided a car that was driven at him.

Proving that for those like Trevor the job is a labour of love and a million miles away from seeking financial rewards, he concluded, “Pay is nothing to us really. It’s our heritage. It’s what we’re fighting for. That’s what means more to me than anything else, more than any pay or anything like that.”

Russ’s wife comes from a fifth-generation mining family tracing their roots to immigrants fleeing the potato famine in Ireland during the 1840s. Russ worked at Sharlston pit from the age of 16 before finally ending up in the Selby coalfields and Kellingley.

Russ was asked why after five months on strike, over pay that is close to the minimum wage, did he think management has chosen confrontation rather than settling a dispute:

“They can clearly afford it. I don’t know. It’s just a question of, ‘I’m in charge. You’ll do what I say’. It’s very Victorian values. It’s not democratic. We’re a very democratic union. We go on numbers, so we’ll have meetings every so often, and rather than one person saying we’re going to do this, we vote on things, and it’s done democratically... We’ll never accept anything where

they’re going to discipline somebody.

“They’ve taken advantage of our goodwill. We did everything here on basic wages. Built everything and willing to help share our history and this heritage. We need to tell people how big it is.”

There was a palpable sense among the pickets that their struggle was part of something much larger. Russ added; “It’s just not just. The poor old bin workers [Birmingham refuse workers], they’re not asking for anything. Not asking for a change in the system. And they’re going to take eight grand [£8,000] a year off them. What do you do if they’re going to take eight grand a year off you? It’s similar to our dispute. And I just can’t believe the Labour government is letting all this happen.”

The discussion continued among the pickets over broader political and historical issues with copies sold of a WSWs pamphlet marking the 40th Anniversary of the 1984-5 strike which addressed the lessons for the class struggle today.

A recognition that this is part of a broader clampdown by the Starmer government to impoverish workers underlines the need to overcome the isolation of just 40 workers making a defiant stand: Unison the largest union in the UK has 1.3 million members.

As the WSWs article explained: “The five-month isolation of Unison members at the coal mining museum highlights a broader imperative: to remove the dead hand of the union bureaucracy that has blocked resistance across councils, the NHS, and other workplaces. This would unleash workers’ collective strength in a genuine fight that draws together all confronting austerity, irrespective of sector, profession, or employer.”



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