

ANALYSIS



Revolt of the Masses?

After 13 years of defeats and claims that the working class is 'finished' as a political force, it is not surprising that socialists feel euphoric over the tremendous public support for the miners and the prospect of once again fighting - and winning - some real class battles. Unfortunately, the crisis in the ranks of the Tory Party, itself an expression of the crisis within the upper and middle classes, confronts the working class with as many problems and dangers as it does possibilities.

It is self-deluding to believe that the current 'tidal wave of public indignation' represents a revival of the old labour movement's strength. 'Public' opposition to the pit closures is largely opportunist and very much the product of a mutiny by a panic-stricken middle class. Since the end of the miner's strike, 130,000 miners have lost their jobs without a peep of protest from 'middle England', the Labour Party, the trade unions, nor the Tory press which now finds the loss of 30,000 mining jobs

'unacceptable' and 'monstrous'.

There has also been a revival of the opportunism which typified the struggles of the 1970s and which enabled the Tories to inflict such defeats on the working class and the Left. Despite its radical posturing in calling for a general strike, Left politics has dissolved itself completely into 'public opinion'. With rare exceptions, the Left has not stopped to warn of the dangers of allowing a popular movement to be led by middle class sentiments.

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It really is appalling...

Few things are as distressing as watching the middle classes losing their grip on themselves. "Why, on the evening following the news of the closure of 31 coal mines, was I, a middle-class, somewhat more than middle aged, housewife, living in a nice house in leafy suburbia, crying into the washing up?" asks Mrs Jean Nuttall from Kings Langley, Herts, in a letter that made it to the front page of *The Guardian*. It is uncertain whether Mrs. Nuttall's tears are rhetorical or real - but she certainly has a short memory.

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Instead the middle class have subjected working people to an unceasing torrent of abuse and derision. To them, working class people are an un-enterprising bunch of lazy slob in whom the welfare state has fostered a disabling 'dependency culture'. The unemployed have priced themselves out of a job through unjustified wage increases. They burden the NHS with 'life-style' diseases because they persist in such disgusting habits as smoking and eating junk food. Their kids are illiterate, uncouth, under-achieving yobs who have little respect for person or property. Their teenagers get pregnant because they are too dumb to

seek contraceptive advice or plan ahead. The more enterprising sections of the working class - the *Essex Man* of yesterday's mythology - are no better. They are just thick, greedy maniacs who drive flash cars. Social commentary in Britain has progressed little from the old Victorian habit of complaining about the servants.

Even the more liberal sections of the middle classes, who once favoured a particular brand of ethical socialism, have engaged in this reactionary anti-working class offensive. The stupidity and greed of the working classes - they argued - led them to be duped by Thatcher's 'authoritarian populism'. In the fashionable lingo of the times 'working class' became an outmoded 'paradigm'. Everything working class, except Doc Martens, became *passe*, nasty and objectionable. In its social philosophy the liberal middle class also abandoned welfare liberalism to preach the gospel of bourgeois individualism ('identity'), indifference to the plight of others ('difference') and self-reliance ('autonomy') while enjoying the privileges of tenured employment or some grant-funded scam.

Meanwhile, middle class life could not have been more agreeable. The real-estate boom, the credit spree and the liberalisation of financial services allowed the middle classes to engage in all sorts of speculative ventures and accumulate fictitious profits. He played the markets she raked in the easy money by selling

whatever overpriced boutique nick-nacks happened to catch the bourgeoisie's fancy. And while "one's house earned more money than one's salary", the dinner party talk switched to what is truly important in life: whether to lay down Bordeaux or Port, whether stripped pine or painted, to holiday in Tuscany or Provence, to send the girls to Beedales or Roedean, to get a big house in 'the sticks' and commute or get a small place in town and enjoy 'all that London has to offer'? ...and all the other banal preoccupations of glossy magazine journalism.

These are the very same middle classes who now rage at Nigel Lawson for having 'caused' the recession. Nigel Lawson was not to blame for the speculative housing boom of the late 1980s. Lawson only serviced the greed. If he is now universally detested it is only because he was the very epitome of the bourgeois egoism which the middle classes once turned into a religion and which has now turned sour.

Call the Butler, quick!

What has caused the extraordinary shift in liberal opinion which has made the miners the flavour of the month? After all, the last time the middle classes felt united in such "a strong sense of common disapproval" was over the Sainsbury Extension to the National Gallery.

The severity of the slump has ripped the lungs out of bourgeois prosperity and put the fear of God (ie. expropriation) into the middle classes who are fast realising that *their* jobs and livelihoods are now also on the line. In the last two years the value of an average middle-class house of 120,000 has dropped by 20% in real terms and is still falling fast. Millions of people now have a mortgage debt larger than the market value of their house. Unless a bout of hyper-inflation wipes out the value of unpaid mortgages, a whole generation of middle-class speculators will be condemned to a life of debt slavery.

On the jobs front middle class expectations could not be gloomier. While even the middle classes have

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had to work harder over the last decade, they have been relatively cushioned from the nastier aspects of "market realities" and employment legislation which the working class has endured. But now the days have gone are the days when Daddy's chums or a half-decent degree from one of the proper universities could secure some sort of meal ticket. What has made the middle class masses so Bolshie is not the barbarity of 30,000 working class job losses but the much larger multi-billion pound Treasury axe that looms over thousands of professional jobs.

"The Hun Has Won".

The collapse of Sterling earlier this month has also demoralised the British middle classes since it is clear that something much more than a 'cyclical downturn' is at hand. Within 48 hours of Sterling's abandonment of the ERM being celebrated as a "victory over Europe" and the Huns, the scale of the disaster of began to dawn. British capital has now been relegated to the third division along with Italy, Spain and Portugal. By the end of the decade the City will have lost out to the *de facto* power in Europe - Germany.

Now that the glint of brass on the coffin spell their name, the liberal middle classes have been gripped by an intense panic. "Burning with anger and possessed by fear" as the *Daily Telegraph* noted, they have reached out for an old ally. Put in *Guardian* speak, "The sense of community, of shared responsibility is a fragile being, but without it what are we?" - bleats Mrs. Nuttal - "Market forces are now all-important, caring is only considered possible if economically sound... My tears, and the tears of many are for the future, for the fair and caring society that is slipping away."

The middle class do not want to see a strong workers' movement with its own agenda, just a more assertive, well-behaved, lobby. Now that Scargill and the NUM are harmless it is safe to ride on the backs of the miners and use the working class as cannon fodder in a battle to influence government policy to their own advantage.

Dirty Diggers

An even more sinister aspect to the mutiny of the middle classes has been the role played by dissent within the Tory party. Every Tory demagogue, every reactionary Little Englander and back-bencher with a small-business gripe, has now come out in 'support' of the miners - but these are precisely the rats who celebrated the defeat of the miners in 1985. Surely it is a sign of the weakness of working class politics, and not its strength, that arch Tory reactionaries such as Teddy Taylor, Marcus Fox, Winston Churchill and Elizabeth Peacock can pose as the heroes of the hour? With no real policy alternatives on Europe, and their bankruptcy made clear at the recent party conference, the Tory anti-Europe Right have seized on the miners to 'oppose' John Major. The *Sunday Telegraph* could not have put it more blatantly: "If the defeat of the government over the miners is the readiest way to advance that cause, so be it." Once the Tory rebels have got what they want from the issue, these 'friends' of the working class will drop the miners like hot coals.

The Labour Bureaucracy

Only slightly less despicable than the opportunism of the middle classes has been the attitude of the trade union bureaucracy. It is not necessary to waste words denouncing their decade of inaction in defending workers' basic rights, but the idea that Norman Willis has now been pushed into action by the working class is plainly absurd. The TUC has not been 'pushed to the left'. What has 'emboldened' a cringing bureaucrat such as Willis is not a renewed faith in the working class - nor the fear of it - but the possibility of taking advantage of the confusion and divisions among the Tories.

The leadership of the NUM has shown itself no more assertive than the TUC. Arthur Scargill's moderation has not gone unnoticed nor unappreciated. The *Sunday Telegraph*, not a paper known for its proletarian sympathies, could pat 'our Arthur' on the head with the following words: "Mr. Scargill has sensed the overwhelming mood in middle class support for the miners and, for the

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first time in his career, has become a model of restraint and injured innocence... having obtained the inevitable mandate from his NUM delegate conference for a strike ballot, he is calling instead for reasoned discussion." How very agreeable. If the current struggle over pit closures serves to bury the myth of Scargill's radicalism, working class politics will have at least taken an important step forward.

Road to Defeat

To rely on middle class 'moral indignation' is to rely on a sentimental charity which can only weaken the ability of the working class to develop its own strategy to deal with the many more thousands of jobs cuts which the Treasury is about to implement. These are hard times, and good will is in short supply.

No quarter should be given to liberal romanticism about 'mining communities'. The job of a Yorkshire miner is no different from that of a dinner-lady in Camden or a dustman in Glasgow. To wax lyrical about 'mining traditions', brass bands and pit communities only leads to an opportunist strategy based on courting middle class liberal approval. There is nothing more dangerous to working class politics than lending any credence to the chatter of the middle classes in a rebellious mood.

But by far the biggest threat facing the miners is the idea of defending jobs by trying to prove the commercial viability of the pits. Neither the miners, nor any group of workers threatened with redundancy, can hope to gain anything from such a strategy. The proposed pit closures are not an act of 'economic vandalism' towards the 'British Coalfield'.

Had the 30 pits proposed for closure been profitable they would have been sold off in next year's privatization of British Coal. The government certainly needs the cash. The fact is that the pits would be unprofitable even if they were given away - a solution which would let the Tories off the hook. That is why no business group has made any offer. It is sheer lunacy to fight for jobs on the basis of 'profitability', and more so at the beginning of a slump.

In a condition in which the working class has no control over any aspect of the economy, its strategy must be to insist on the right of every worker to a job, irrespective of the

viability of 'their' industry. To plead a 'special case' is only to sow disunity among workers. To accuse the government of a financially bankrupt country of 'vindictiveness' is a refusal to confront the objective crisis facing the British and world economies - a depression. This crisis means that no concessions are possible unless workers are able to fight for fundamental change in society. Unless the working class is able to develop a strategy of its own, based on an uncompromising defence of jobs as a worker's right and without distinction of occupation, sex or race, the only beneficiaries of the current 'support' for the miners will be the middle classes and

the Labour Party.

It is impossible to say how the crisis over the pit closures will develop, but Michael Heseltine has tabled an intelligent strategy which spells defeat for the miners. Knowing that the Tory rebels will soon tire of the 'class struggle' and move on to something else, and that the unions have no stomach of a fight, Heseltine's moratorium aims to strangle the miners slowly while dangling a 37,000 redundancy pay-off in front of them. On the present balance of forces, he stands every chance of succeeding.

PUBLIC MEETING

THE MINERS AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

7.30 pm Wednesday 28 October
London School of Economics
Houghton Street WC2
Tube: Holborn

For more information Contact Analysis on 071 737 7582.

St Phillips Building
Room 132
Opposite The George