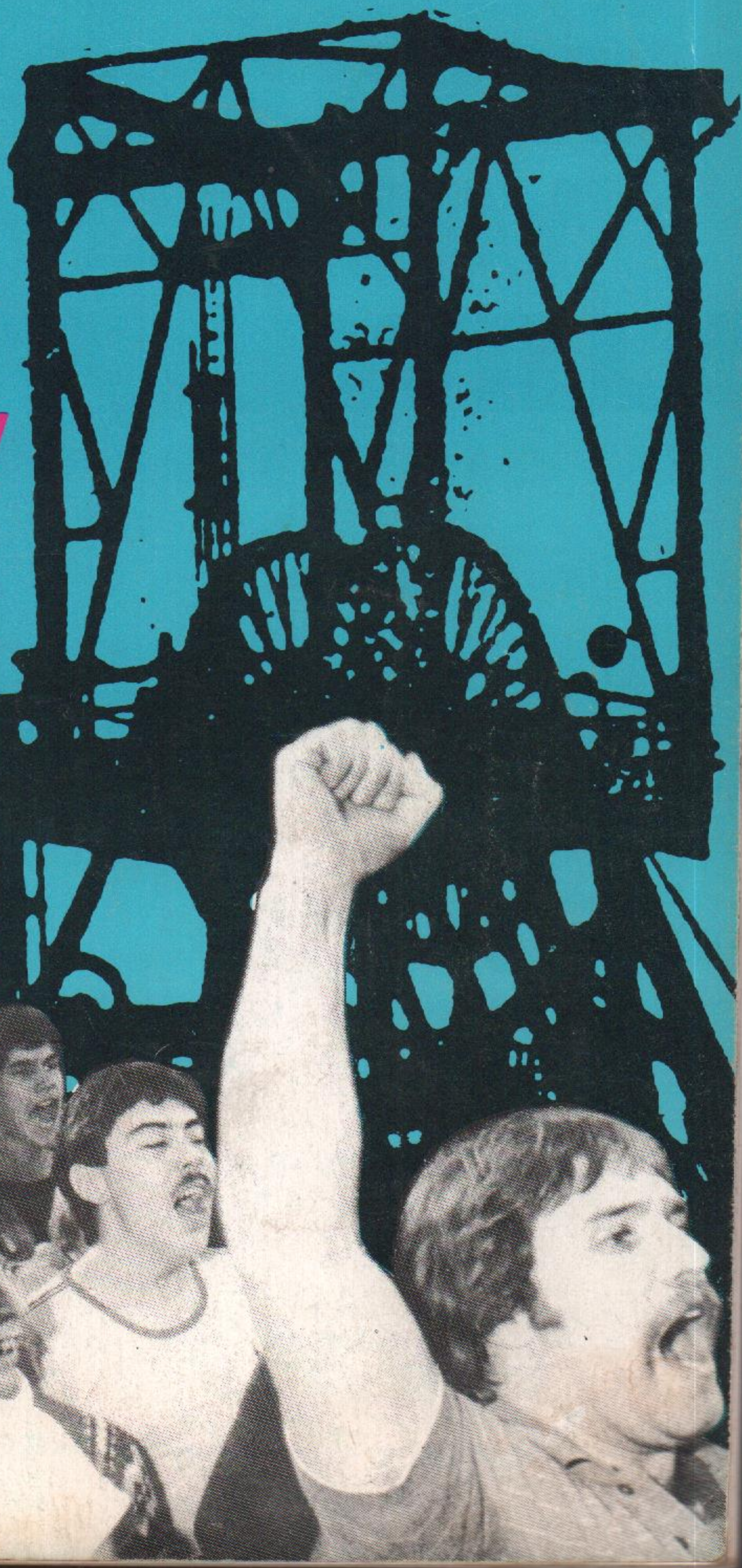
The miners' fight for jobs

Our day will come

Mike Freeman



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1. Introduction

Was it worth it? Was it worth sticking it out for 12 months of hardship and insecurity only to go back without anything to show for it? Many miners and their supporters are now asking these questions. Others have drawn pessimistic conclusions and see the miners' strike as further proof that the government cannot be beaten.

Such questions miss the point altogether. The miners had no choice but to fight. If workers never fought or went on strike they would never be taken seriously as a class. If workers didn't fight they would have no rights and would be at the mercy of their exploiters. After the miners' strike there can be no doubt that the British working class is a force to be reckoned with. For 12 months the miners and their communities fought with courage and determination to defend their jobs, their living standards and their dignity. Their fierce struggle against overwhelming odds has shown millions of workers that it is possible to fight back against the system. The question isn't whether it was worth it or not. The question is how can we fight more effectively in the future? This pamphlet sets out to answer this question.

The strike summed up

The miners' strike has had a major impact on British politics. The government has paid a heavy price for beating the miners. The cost in financial terms — of substituting oil for coal at the power stations and all the other expenses of the dispute — is only one burden on the government. The political cost has also been high. The aggressive strategy pursued by the Thatcher government and National Coal Board boss Ian MacGregor has caused widespread dissension within the establishment. The top level management of the coal board has been ravaged by disagreements leading to sackings and resignations. Senior Tory politicians have expressed doubts about Thatcher's confrontationist approach and the government's popularity has declined. Church leaders have openly questioned the government's policy of directly attacking the working class.

The main cost of the dispute has been the erosion of the authority of the government, the police and the courts. To ensure victory the Tories were obliged to launch a paramilitary police occupation of the coalfields, backed up by the courts. But state repression only provoked workers' resistance. The scale of the conflict between miners and the state was far greater in 1984-85 than in 1926. More than 10 000 miners were arrested in the course of the strike. Only 1500 were arrested in the General Strike. By the time the strike ended more than 120 miners were locked up in prison cells and many more were still awaiting trial.

The role played by the police and the courts in the miners' strike has convinced many miners and sympathetic workers in other industries that the 'rule of law' means nothing more than the rule of the bosses. To beat the miners the bosses were forced to push aside all the old methods of negotiation and compromise and go on an all-out offensive. In fighting back many miners have been forced to go beyond the limits of traditional trade unionism to take on the riot police and defy the judges. Now the old barriers are down there is no going back. The widespread loss of respect for key state institutions is a major problem facing the establishment as it prepares for the battles ahead.

What went wrong?

The miners put up a brave fight, but they were defeated. If they and other groups of workers are to learn from this experience it is essential to understand what went wrong. The miners' strike proved that there is no such thing as a purely industrial or trade union issue. Jobs, living standards and union rights are inconsistent with the requirements of the capitalist system. That's why the government, the employers and the courts treated the strike as a challenge to their authority. The fundamental problem of the strike was that while the coal board and the government were waging class warfare, the leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers and the labour movement were conducting an ordinary industrial dispute. The employers were moving into a new-style, openly political, class struggle. The union leaders were clinging on to old-fashioned trade unionism. The bosses were fighting from the start for victory and nothing less. The union leaders sought only a negotiated settlement. While the employers and the Tories scorned conciliation and compromise, the miners' leaders were always available for talks.

For the establishment the issues at stake went far beyond the economics of the coal industry. The Tories' objective was to crush the most militant trade union in Britain. They wanted to make an example of the miners as the economy threatened to slide into ever deeper recession. But the leaders of the TUC and the Labour Party sought to restrict the scope of the struggle to that of a routine industrial dispute. While the Tories glorified strike-breaking and police terror, the Labour leaders condemned active rank and file resistance to the scabs and the riot squads. TUC chief Norman Willis and Labour leader Neil Kinnock distanced the official labour movement from the strikers. They tried to justify the strike in terms of their commitment to the best interests of the British coalmining industry.

The Labour leaders repeatedly begged the Prime Minister to intervene and resolve the dispute through the familiar negotiated sell-out. In the closing weeks of

the dispute Arthur Scargill agreed to make substantial concessions through informal contacts with the coal board set up by the TUC. Kinnock again pleaded for Thatcher to accept a negotiated deal. But Thatcher told him bluntly that she wanted nothing less than unconditional surrender and she wanted it 'dead straight, honest and no fudging'. Kinnock and Willis — and Scargill — could learn a lot from Thatcher and MacGregor about putting class interests to the fore and fighting ruthlessly to win.

The leaders of the labour movement tried to disguise the defeat in diplomatic phrases about 'an honourable return to work'. But after 12 months on strike the dignity and courage of the miners were not in question. Some NUM leaders spoke of the outcome of the strike as 'a historic victory'. Such flattery only trivialises the struggle of the miners. The miners did not fight for a year so that their leaders could indulge in meaningless rhetoric. Such diplomatic evasions only confuse and prevent workers from learning from their experience. What group of workers would want to fight to achieve a 'historic victory' of this sort? In the end the NUM signed no deal with the coal board. But the NUM leaders made it clear that they had accepted the coal board's terms. The failure to win an amnesty for the 700-plus victimised miners was only the most obvious feature of the betrayal. The NUM's retreat implicitly accepted that the coal board's pit closure programme would go ahead.

The NUM leaders made bold declarations that the fight would go on. But the miners' strike ended as it began, with militants from the pits most directly under attack trying to picket out miners in other areas. Back in March 1984 Yorkshire miners went to Kent and other areas. In March 1985 Kent miners went to Yorkshire. The miners' historic battle for jobs ended up with individual militants and individual pits being left to fight alone against victimisations and redundancies.

The common theme was the failure of the national leadership to give a national lead. At the start of the strike the NUM leaders followed the militants in endorsing an area-by-area strike strategy. But they failed to take the measures necessary to give all-out national backing for resistance to a nationwide onslaught on miners' jobs and the miners' union. At the end of the strike the NUM leaders talked about 'guerrilla war' in the coalfields. But they provided no national strategy for the defence of victimised miners or for resistance to the inevitable round of pit closures. Fiery platform rhetoric and criminal evasion of the problems of winning unity and organising effective action characterised the NUM leadership throughout the miners' strike.

The way ahead

Guerrilla warfare will certainly continue — and not only in the coalfields. But the defeat of the miners' union means that the initiative now lies with the bosses. The no-deal return means putting the miners at the mercy of local management. The consequences of this surrender were already apparent in the first days of the return to work in a spate of intimidation and victimisation. Bosses in other sectors will draw confidence from the defeat of the miners and take steps to impose tighter

discipline and worse conditions on their workforces.

The question now is how to carry on resistance against the bosses. The miners have shown how to fight long and hard against all the forces of the capitalist class. But to take the miners' struggle forward requires a change of direction. The miners' struggle for jobs can only advance on a national level through a challenge to the bureaucratic strategy that led the strike to defeat. If the working class learns to match the miners' determination with a fighting policy and leadership then we will really win some victories.

2. Dishonourable deals

By the end of February the miners' strike had reached a critical stage. The coal board claimed that more than 50 per cent of the miners were at work. There was no doubt that the employers manipulated the figures for propaganda purposes. In many areas there were still too few miners back at work to allow coalmining or even underground working to begin. But the striking miners knew that many of their comrades on strike had drifted back and that many more were on the verge of returning. A hard core of strikers in the more militant areas remained determined to fight on. But most miners who remained on strike did so out of loyalty to the union and their communities. Few still expected to win and all looked to informal talks among the NUM, the TUC and the coal board in anticipation of a settlement.

After 12 months on the picket lines most miners had come to the conclusion that

Loyal to the last: militant miners supported the NUM to the bitter end

they no longer had a hope of winning. This was inevitable given that the leaders of the NUM had given up any attempt to win the strike several months previously. After Christmas the NUM leaders put everything into negotiating a settlement. They no longer made even token attempts to organise effective picketing or solidarity action. At the same time, they tried to cover up their sell-out with rhetoric about seeking 'an honourable settlement' and 'going back to work with our heads held high'. But neither option pursued by the NUM leaders offered much honour or dignity to the men and women who had fought so long and hard.

The national leadership favoured a negotiated settlement between the NUM and the coal board at national level. Some area leaders recommended 'an orderly return to work' without a national deal. This scheme gathered support when all attempts at a national agreement failed. It was the acceptance of this policy at a national delegate conference in London on 3 March that signalled the end of the strike. Let's look at the two alternatives more closely.

Negotiated surrender

The miners' strike began in March 1984 when the coal board announced a programme of pit closures leading to 20 000 job losses within 12 months. Miners at Cortonwood colliery in Yorkshire had already walked out in response to the threat of imminent closure. Some Scottish miners were also on strike over threatened closures. Within days the whole of Yorkshire, Scotland, South Wales and Kent were out on strike. The NUM leadership endorsed the action already underway in the militant areas. At the same time Arthur Scargill offered to meet the coal board 'at any time and at any place' to negotiate a settlement.

In the early stages of the strike the NUM leadership declared an intransigent stand against closures. When MacGregor offered in April to meet the NUM to discuss phasing the proposed redundancies over a longer period, Scargill dismissed the offer as 'nonsense':

'As far as I'm concerned, pit closures and job losses are not negotiable.'

This is the sort of fighting talk for which the NUM leader has built up a reputation among his enemies and supporters alike. But Scargill's militant rhetoric concealed a commitment to negotiations characteristic of mainstream British trade union leaders.

Over the next six months Scargill and the other NUM leaders engaged in nine rounds of fruitless negotiations with the coal board. These centred on the very questions of closures and redundancies which Scargill had asserted were 'not negotiable'. They also passed countless hours in talks on the same subjects with Acas, the government's arbitration and conciliation service, with the TUC and with the Labour Party leaders. But the coal board, backed by the government, refused to make any concessions on its commitment to close unprofitable pits. Formal negotiations broke down in October. When the strike had lost all momentum in the early weeks of 1985, Scargill began to make significant concessions in an attempt to

persuade the coal board to negotiate a final settlement.

In January the NUM leadership dropped its formal precondition that the closure of pits on economic grounds (rather than on the grounds of the exhaustion of reserves) was not up for negotiation. Scargill now agreed to talks 'without preconditions'. But an increasingly confident coal board now insisted on preconditions. In a letter to NUM General Secretary Peter Heathfield, coal board personnel director Merrik Spanton laid out the bosses' hardline terms:

'In view of the many public statements made by the leaders of the NUM in categorically refusing to countenance the procedures that could lead to closures on uneconomic grounds, it remains essential that the NCB is satisfied that this no longer remains the position of the leaders of the NUM.'

The coal board now insisted on a written acceptance of uneconomic pit closures as the condition for further talks. This was too much of an about turn for the NUM leaders to accept and the talks failed to take place.

In February an accelerating return to work increased the pressures on the NUM leadership. Scargill now indicated that he was prepared to accept the terms offered to Nacods, the pit supervisors' union, to head off its threatened strike action back in October. But what was the Nacods deal? The coal board agreed to introduce an extra stage into the procedure for closing pits — a review by an independent body. But the agreement was silent on the terms of reference of the appeals body, its composition or its constitution. It was clear, however, that 'at the end of this procedure the board will make its final decision', as the board later summed up the position in its proposed draft agreement with the NUM. The Nacods deal also referred to 'five-year plans reflecting both market and production opportunities'. This was a clear reference to the prospect of closures on economic grounds as well as closures on the grounds of exhaustion.

Back in October the NUM had denounced the Nacods deal. Scargill had pointed out, rightly, that it amounted to an acceptance of pit closures on economic grounds. In January, Scargill made it clear in an interview in *The Guardian* that acceptance of the Nacods agreement would constitute a sell-out:

'Anybody who...suggests that the Nacods deal was acceptable is quite frankly bloody stupid. The deal was an absolute sham.' (10 January)

At the end of February, Scargill told coal board official Michael Eaton on television that he was prepared to accept the Nacods deal 'in its entirety'.

The draft agreement which shuttled between the NUM leaders and the coal board through TUC intermediaries in mid-February contained a significant omission. It included no mention of the fate of the 700-plus miners who had been victimised by the coal board for various offences related to the strike. The NUM leaders had repeatedly pledged that there could be no return to work without an amnesty for the sacked men. Yet in its final comments on the draft the NUM leadership objected only to the coal board's insistence on an explicit commitment

to a profitable industry and uneconomic pit closures. The NUM leadership had already abandoned the victimised miners to their fate. While the NUM leaders were making concession after concession to the employers, they were also concerned to avoid taking the blame for selling out the strike. Their main preoccupation in the closing weeks of the strike was to get somebody, anybody, to carry the can for their betrayal of the strike. At the first executive meeting of 1985 Scargill proposed that the NUM's negotiating team should be expanded to include the entire executive. Negotiations had previously been handled by the NUM's top trio of Scargill (President), McGahey (vice-president) and Heathfield (General Secretary).

This manoeuvre did nothing to take the strike forward, but it meant that the whole executive would have to shoulder responsibility for any negotiated settlement. The executive followed the leaders' guilty shuffling tactics and passed the buck to the national delegate conference. The miners' leaders were so terrified of the wrath of the rank and file that they used every possible device to spread the blame. The NUM leaders also went to great lengths to get TUC chief Norman Willis to act as their fall guy. In mid-February they persuaded Willis to meet MacGregor and thrash out the terms of a draft agreement. On 14 February Heathfield told a London Labour Party rally that the informal talks were 'on the verge of a breakthrough':

'We hope that there is a formula that enables the miners to return to work together with the same dignity.'

When it became clear that the formula amounted to an unconditional surrender, the NUM leaders had to cover their tracks.

Scargill denied all knowledge of the terms and implied that, as far as he knew, the TUC chief was engaged only in drawing up an agenda for talks rather than the terms of a settlement. Heathfield indicated that the NUM leadership had authorised the TUC to negotiate a final agreement, but criticised Willis for his

Miners out of jail!: activists demand 'no amnesty, no return' at 3 March conference

conduct of the talks. Willis himself disclaimed all responsibility for the draft agreement, insisting that it had been drawn up by the coal board, not the TUC. In the event the deal was rejected by the full NUM executive and by a national delegate conference on 21 February. The whole sordid business showed how desperate the NUM leaders had become to secure their own positions and reputations whatever the cost to the miners.

While the NUM leadership wavered and manoeuvred the coal board took a harder line. As the strike crumbled it became more and more obvious that the bosses intended not merely to push through pit closures, but to impose a crushing defeat on the NUM. The employers and the government had never wanted a negotiated settlement. They were out for victory. After the last executive meeting before the delegate meeting voted to return to work Scargill summed up the grim position:

'It appears that the coal board, at the insistence of the government, is not prepared to negotiate. It is a complete war of attrition.'

But the bosses had been fighting a war of attrition from the start. The problem was that it had taken 12 months for this reality to dawn on the NUM leadership.

The 'orderly return'

The idea that the miners should return to work without reaching any national agreement was first floated in public early in February by Kim Howells, research officer and spokesman for the South Wales area:

'The possibility which is being discussed everywhere is one of saying we are not signing any bit of paper which gives anyone the right to close pits for economic reasons or for whatever reason they care to dream up, and that we will take the boys back and fight it on a pit-by-pit basis, regardless of whatever consequences follow.'

To make this capitulation more acceptable to militant miners Howells raised the prospect of 'a guerrilla fight on a pit-by-pit basis'. The fact that this option was being put forward in South Wales, the area with the lowest return to work figures, gave it added authority.

Howells' proposals met with a hostile reception from the national NUM leaders who were still pressing for a national settlement. It embarrassed the Welsh area leadership which temporarily suspended Howells from his position as official spokesman. But when the national leadership's attempts to negotiate a settlement reached a dead end more and more of the NUM's area leaders swung towards the Howells option. At the final delegate conference a motion from South Wales for 'an orderly return to work without a national settlement' was supported by Durham, Northumberland, North Derbyshire, Lancashire and most of the union's craft and white collar sections. Yorkshire, Scotland and Kent voted against. Consistent to the end in its refusal to give a lead, the national executive made no

Orderly surrender: Scargill leads miners back 'with heads high' but without guaranteed jobs

recommendation at all. Scargill, secure in the knowledge that the majority of the conference would vote for a return, recommended a continuation of the strike. The NUM leaders could thus claim that it was the delegate conference that had finally sold out the strike.

The 'orderly return' option made the same concessions to the coal board as the national settlement option. It accepted the inevitability of pit closures, particularly the closures of the five pits in the firing line from the start of the dispute — Cortonwood, Bulcliffe Wood, Polmaise, Snowdown and Herrington. The proposed 'guerrilla war' was nothing more than a face-saver for the area leaders. Miners knew well, in South Wales better than anywhere, that attempts to resist pit closures through local or area action were destined to failure. The lesson of fights against closures at Tymawr-Lewis-Merthyr in South Wales and at Kinneil and Cardowan in Scotland was that national action was necessary to stop the wave of redundancies. The orderly return to work was an orderly surrender to pit closures.

The 'orderly return' also meant abandoning the victimised miners. The South Wales motion included a proposal to negotiate an amnesty with the coal board. As the coal board had repeatedly ruled out any concessions to the victimised miners this was just another face-saver for the union leaders. Scargill and other national leaders emphasised the plight of the victimised miners in their opposition to the South Wales motion. They forgot to mention that they never objected to the draft national agreement on these grounds. The return to work after the NUM national delegate conference left behind several hundred miners whose only crime had been to follow NUM policy on the picket lines.

The NUM leadership's endorsement of the 'orderly return' was its ultimate capitulation. For 12 months the leadership had failed to lead the strike forward. It had failed to unite the miners, failed to organise effective picketing, failed to mobilise sympathetic action to make the strike bite. For 12 months the area leaders, in South Wales as much as anywhere, had stifled rank and file involvement and

initiative. They had curbed picketing and made deals to allow steel plants and other industrial users of coal to stay in production. The proposal for a return without an agreement meant a bankrupt leadership finally passing the buck to the rank and file. It amounted to a declaration that 'we've got nothing more to offer, but if you want to go back to work it's up to you'. The first time the union leaders encouraged any rank and file initiative in the miners' strike was when they suggested that the strikers should give up and return to work.

The more the NUM weakened the more the coal board took a hard line. The bosses contemptuously dismissed threats of guerrilla war from union leaders who had shown over long months their preference for the conference room rather than the picket line. As the union leaders tried to save face the bosses put the boot in. When Scargill insisted that the overtime ban imposed by the NUM in November 1983 to press for higher wages was still on, the coal board made clear that there would be no wage rises until the NUM formally accepted the pit closure programme. In effect this meant that the miners, who have had no pay rise for two years, were being forced to take a pay cut as well as accept the inevitable round of pit closures as the bitter price of defeat.

Not fit to lead

The final sell-out of the miners' strike was the culmination of 12 months of vacillation by the NUM leadership. Ever since the beginning of the strike the union leaders have been two or three steps behind the employers and the government. The result was that the strike failed to turn out the nation's lights. It failed to put the sort of pressure on the coal board and the government that could have forced them to make concessions. When Scargill's last bluff was called — his attempt to drag Nacods into joint talks with the coal board in January — it was the NUM leadership which was forced to make all the concessions.

In the closing weeks of the strike the blustering and manoeuvring of the NUM leadership was increasingly exposed. Three themes recurred in the discussions and public statements of the NUM leaders which raise some of the key problems of the dispute.

First, Scargill tried to deny and minimise the problems of the drift back to work. Every day he quibbled with coal board statistics about the numbers of miners working and returning to work. It was not until the trickle before Christmas became a flood in the New Year that he acknowledged that there was a problem at all. But rank and file miners, who had been tied down picketing their own pits since the end of August, knew that there was a problem. Instead of coming up with measures to combat the drift back or plans to take the strike forward and raise morale, Scargill tried to pretend that it was all a coal board/media plot.

The second theme in many statements by Scargill and the rest of the leadership was the role of the TUC and other unions in the dispute. In his final return to work statement Scargill blamed the TUC and other unions for not supporting the NUM in line with TUC policy agreed at the September conference. There is no doubt that the TUC played a characteristically spineless role throughout the dispute. Yet it

was Scargill who had acclaimed the TUC's empty gestures of support at Brighton. It was Scargill who warmly endorsed the rhetorical support of the Triple Alliance of mining, rail and steel unions at the beginning of the strike. And it was Scargill who had engaged in the closest consultations with Norman Willis when he attempted to work out a final settlement in February. If miners put their trust in the leaders of other unions it was because the NUM leadership had encouraged this.

The third issue which preoccupied the NUM leaders at the end of the strike was the Notts miners. The January national executive meeting voted to recommend the expulsion of the Notts area from the national union. This final measure was postponed as many miners' leaders balked at its divisive consequences. It also became apparent that many Notts miners, even those who had worked throughout the strike, remained loyal to the national union. But many striking miners remained sympathetic to the exclusion of the Notts working miners from the union.

In the climate of bitterness and recrimination at the end of the strike the NUM leadership's preoccupations pinpointed a series of scapegoats for its own failures. Many miners put the blame on the miners who returned to work and undermined the solidarity and effectiveness of the union. Others blamed steelworkers and power workers and lorry drivers. The most popular scapegoats of all were the Notts miners.

Spreading the blame around the rank and file is both unjustified and demoralising. It is unjustified because the decisive failure was at the level of leadership not at rank and file level. The problem of the miners' strike was that the leadership of the labour movement, including the leadership of the NUM, prevaricated and blustered and ultimately betrayed the heroism of ordinary workers. It is demoralising for workers to blame one another because it provides no way forward. This is why it is so crucial to put the blame where it really lies.

Let's turn to examine the key issues of the closing weeks of the strike — the back-to-work movement, the failure of trade union solidarity and the problem of the Notts miners. These issues provide the key to all the failures of the strike.

3. The drift back

The accelerated drift back to work in January and February was a key factor in bringing the miners' strike to an end..Yet the miners who returned to work in the closing weeks of the dispute had already been on strike for longer than any group of workers in the post-war period. What made them finally decide to give up and go back?

Hardship

The most obvious explanation for the drift back to work was sheer hardship. Single miners had received no state benefits and were forced to rely on family and friends and the union's haphazard system of soup kitchens and food parcels. After nine and 10 months without any income beyond the NUM's token picketing allowance many miners were in desperate poverty. Miners with families were entitled to claim benefits. The state deducted £15 from their entitlement on the assumption that the union paid out the equivalent in strike pay. Since the NUM does not provide strike pay this was a direct deduction from miners' families. In some areas families were able to take advantage of soup kitchens and food parcels. Where miners lived some distance from the local union welfare or the branch was not well organised, families were forced to beg and borrow to keep going.

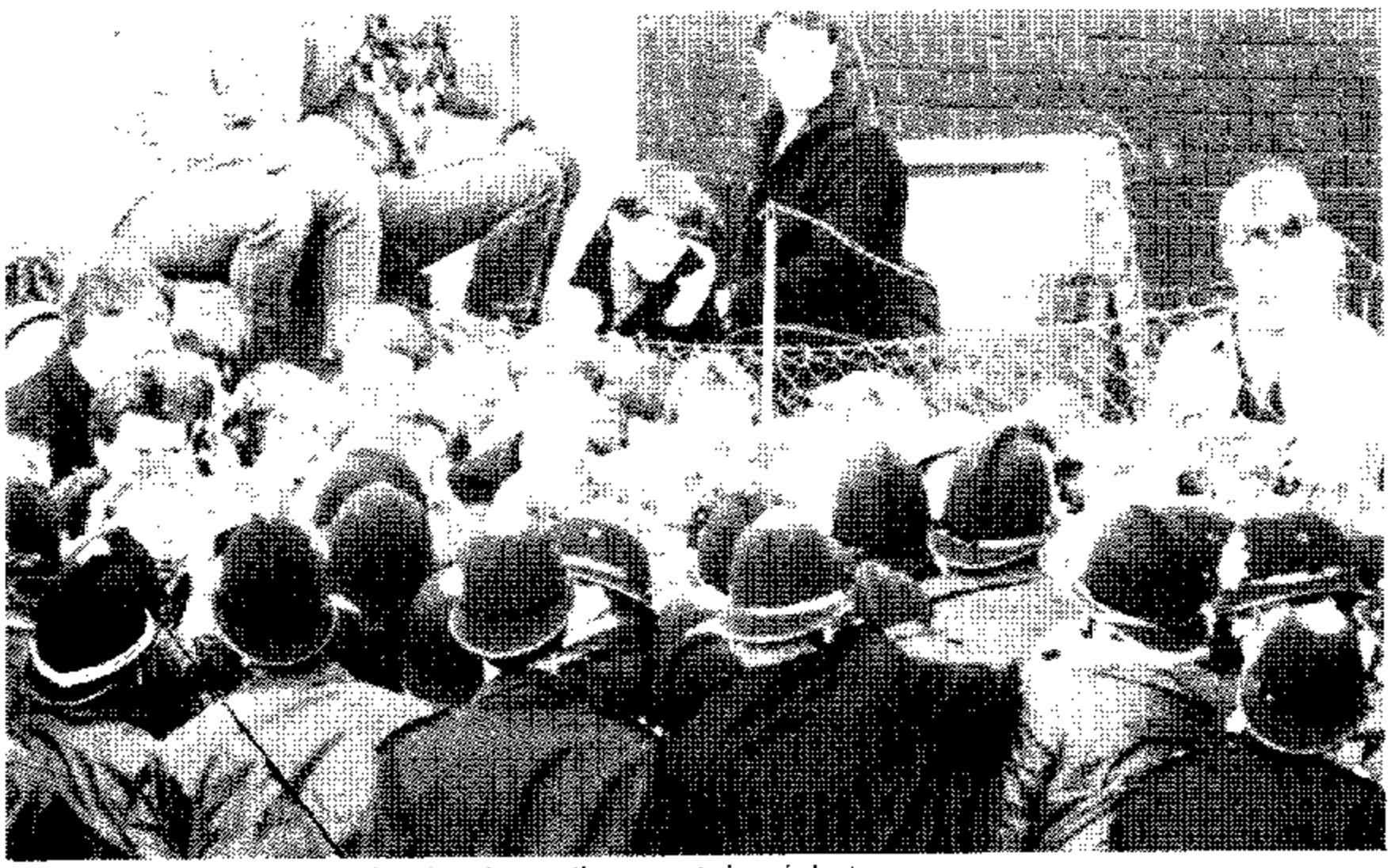
As the strike dragged on the debts and the hardships mounted. For many strikers the pressures of paying bills, keeping up with mortgage and hire purchase payments and providing children with winter shoes and clothes became unbearable. After giving up cars, holidays, entertainment and decent food for month after month the threat of losing their homes or having essential services cut off was the last straw for some miners. Yet the hardships were more or less the same for all miners in all areas. Whether or not these pressures resulted in a return to work depended on miners' morale and their assessment of the prospects of victory.

Miners who were actively involved in the strike, in picketing and in the soup kitchens, were able to keep their spirits up and their hopes high. Miners who were

not actively involved, and these were always a majority of the strikers, were more susceptible to all the pressures of hungry families and a hostile media. Hardships were difficult enough to bear when miners felt that the strike was going forward and victory was still possible. They became increasingly unbearable when the strike lost momentum and the chances of beating the coal board and the government appeared more and more remote. Christmas on strike was bad enough. But a New Year on strike without any new initiative from the NUM leadership was even worse. Demoralisation resulting from the lack of decisive leadership was the key factor in the final drift back to work.

Picketing problems

Nowhere was the absence of leadership more apparent than on the picket lines. And nowhere were the consequences more damaging for the effectiveness of the strike and the morale of the strikers. Rank and file militants in every area told the same story. From the start of the strike picketing had been badly organised and badly led. Strikers from one North Yorkshire pit were sent to picket out miners from a Lancashire colliery that had been closed two years earlier. Other strikers sent out without maps spent long hours driving blindly around country lanes in search of the pit they were supposed to picket. In many areas branch officials were rarely seen on the picket lines. When they appeared they rarely played a useful role in marshalling the strikers' forces against the police. In July officials at Scotland's Bilston Glen pit and local police agreed that pickets would stop throwing stones, the police would stop using truncheons, and both sides would just push each other. The next day the pickets arrived unarmed for the shoving match. Police immediately



Fenced in: poor organisation let police contain pickets

baton-charged them, hospitalising and arresting the militants. The NUM made no special preparations to defend picket lines against the massed assaults, the riot shields and truncheons, the horses and dogs, and all the other tactics used by the police. The result was that ill-prepared and ill-equipped miners were crushed by highly trained and specially armed riot police squads.

Some courageous miners tried to take on the riot police. But they were easily isolated in the face of a coordinated police onslaught. Within weeks most of the militants had been arrested at least once. Restrictive bail conditions kept many miners off the picket lines and those who continued to defy the law soon ended up in prison. Most miners were understandably reluctant to take on the vastly superior forces of the state. Hence they hung back from the front line of the fighting and avoided direct contact with the police. Most pickets contented themselves with ritual pushing and shoving against the massed ranks of the police. Many more stayed away from the picket lines altogether.

Some militants accused their mates of cowardice. They complained that miners were allowing the police to single out individuals for arrest and carry them off for a beating. The police by contrast were noted for their refusal to abandon their colleagues when they became isolated in the melée. But this was merely a comment on the better organisation and training of the police for this sort of combat. It is a military axiom that it takes leadership and discipline to generalise courage among a fighting force. But only one side on the miners' picket lines was organised according to military principles — the police. If the courage of the rank and file miners had been matched by determined leadership they would have been invincible. In the event the miners were contained by the police, though not without considerable difficulty and vast expense.

Flying pickets were an innovation of the miners' strikes of the late sixties, made famous in the national strike of 1972. Yet the flying pickets scarcely got off the ground in 1984. When they did it appeared to many miners that they were flying in the wrong direction. In the early days of the strike the NUM leadership put the main focus of picketing on the big steel plants. This followed the initiative of militants in South Wales and Scotland whose pits directly supplied the big local steel plants of Llanwern and Ravenscraig. The focus on steel plants, which were already threatened with closure and had little direct impact on the economy, led to squabbles among the union leaders and the breakdown of solidarity. When train drivers refused to transport coal and other raw materials into the plants, the employers had no difficulty in recruiting an army of scab lorry drivers to do the job. Meanwhile the power stations — the key to the success of the 1972 strike — were neglected.

Other targets chosen for mass flying pickets had even less significance. The Orgreave coke depot near Sheffield was selected by the NUM leadership for a major display of strength during the summer. Orgreave was merely a storage depot for coke for the Scunthorpe steel works. It was chosen by the NUM as a good place for a token mass picket, a symbolic re-enactment of the historic mass picket at the Saltley coke depot in the Midlands during the 1972 strike. But whereas Saltley

Come along quietly, sir: police used snatch squads to silence activists

showed the unity and coordination of the trade unions, Orgreave exposed their divisions and disorganisation. At Saltley the Birmingham engineering workers turned out in a massive display of solidarity. The only other trade unionists at Orgreave were scab lorry drivers from the TGWU.

The young Scargill marshalled the miners at Saltley and forced the police to give way. At Orgreave an older Scargill was carried off by the police while the riot squads launched cavalry charges against the miners. The miners lacked even elementary organisation or protection. Many wore only T-shirts and shorts as the helmeted and armoured police rode them down with their batons flailing. One Yorkshire militant complained that miners were left to mill about in the fields eating ice cream 'like it was a pop festival', while police formed up at key strategic points 'like Roman legions' — a line of riot shield carriers protecting the ranks of baton-men behind. At the time of the Saltley picket the nation was already in a state

of emergency and power cuts had begun to take place. But at the time of the Orgreave display coal and oil were still flowing into the power stations and the authorities were confidently predicting that they could last out the winter.

By the end of the summer the main focus of picketing had shifted — backwards. The NUM leadership directed miners to return to picketing their own pits to combat the back-to-work movement being promoted by media-backed scab groups in a number of areas. After six months on strike the object of picketing was limited to securing the base of the strike rather than taking it forward to hit energy supplies to industry. Back in the coalfields picketing settled into a routine of groups of miners shouting abuse at returning scabs from behind a wall of police. Scenes of violent conflict followed when police attacked picket lines or occasionally when militants managed to burst through to hinder scab buses. There was scarcely a recorded incident in the entire miners' strike when the miners successfully def the police to prevent a scab from going into work.

Talks and more talks

The cumulative experience of the picket line resulted in profound disillusionment. To some miners it seemed that the pickets were little more than a stage army mobilised for token shows of strength to bolster the negotiating position of the NUM leadership. Others felt that they had become punch bags and riot control practice material for the police. As the most militant miners were picked off the others became even more reluctant to follow them. Most activists reluctantly accepted that there was nothing they could do to make the pickets effective and settled for the routine of standing and shouting. Many more stayed at home where their disillusionment with picketing, combined with all the other pressures, finally pushed some into crossing the picket lines and going back to work.

There was a direct link between the disorganisation of the picketing and the emphasis of the union leadership on a negotiated settlement. There was also a direct link between the failure of each round of talks and the surge back to work. For the NUM leaders, talks — not pickets — were the way to win the strike. They seemed to believe that victory depended on convincing MacGregor and the other coal board bosses of the intellectual superiority of the NUM's case in negotiations around a conference table. Hence the NUM leadership put all its emphasis on securing a negotiated settlement and used every opportunity to present to the public the NUM's case for an expanding and profitable coalmining industry. Pickets were important only as a lever on negotiations, as a means of showing the bosses that the union leaders could mobilise militant support. Pickets had a different function for the rank and file. Ordinary miners joined picket lines to stop scabs from working and to block supplies of coal and other vital raw materials to industry. But the union leaders were terrified of the threat to law and order, and their own control, if militants took the initiative in this way. This is why they failed to organise picketing properly. For them picketing was auxiliary to negotiations, not a means of winning the strike.

The employers' side had a much better appreciation of the place of talks in the class struggle than the NUM leaders. The bosses understood that talks only registered the balance of forces on the ground. Hence they maximised their forces on the picket lines with nationally coordinated saturation policing from day one of the strike. They mobilised the courts and the media on their side. Talks were always of secondary importance to the employers. MacGregor's contemptuous treatment of the miners' leaders and Thatcher's consistent refusal to enter talks with the NUM showed their indifference to negotiations. The bosses recognised that victory depended on superior force, not better arguments. While they put all their energies into smashing the miners' picket lines, the NUM leaders passed the entire strike going in and out of round after round of talks.

The NUM leaders' preoccupation with talks demobilised and ultimately demoralised many miners. If the NUM leaders constantly proclaimed their faith in achieving a solution through negotiations, what was the point of getting your head kicked in on a picket line. Once the talks began — and there were three rounds of abortive talks in April, the second month of the dispute — many of the more moderate miners decided to stay at home and watch the outcome on television. Thousands of miners passed the entire strike in this way, sitting, watching and waiting. Militants castigated them for their passivity. But this passivity was a product of the NUM leadership's strategy. Scargill, Heathfield and McGahey appeared on television virtually every night for 12 months, going in or out of some office block or hotel for talks with the coal board, talks with Acas, talks with the TUC, talks with Nacods, talks with the Labour Party. For miners who didn't have much enthusiasm for token picketing, awaiting the outcome of talks seemed to be the only option.

Dashed hopes

Every new round of formal talks with the coal board, or, later in the strike, even the prospect of negotiations, raised new hopes of a successful end to the dispute. These expectations were always unrealistic because the strike was not putting the coal board or the government under sufficient pressure to make them give way. As the strike entered winter hopes remained high, and even increased among some miners who believed the NUM leaders' promises that power cuts would begin around Christmas. But the lights still did not go out. Every time talks raised hopes only to dash them when they failed to achieve a result. Dashed hopes led to greater demoralisation. Demoralisation inevitably led to a greater drift back to work. Each successive collapse of talks gave the back-to-work movement a boost. By the end of February the breakdown of informal talks through the TUC sent thousands back to work in the course of a single week. The NUM leaders raised expectations they could not possibly fulfil at the negotiating table. The inevitable result was that the strike began to crumble on the ground.

The drift back to work was an indication that the NUM leadership had lost the battle for the loyalty of its members against the barrage of economic, social and

media pressures. Given the scale of these pressures and the weakness of the NUM in combating them, what is remarkable is that the miners' loyalty held up for so long. The failure of the NUM to campaign actively to win and keep winning the hearts and minds of all the miners for the strike allowed all the pressures to undermine the morale of the more moderate and inactive majority of miners.

The miners' strike was run by the NUM on behalf of the militants. This was apparent in many ways. The strike began as a strike of the more militant areas. The leadership endorsed the area-by-area policy which ensured that the moderate areas stayed at work. Even in the militant areas the strike was run by the traditional branch officials, who often co-opted some of the younger activists on to their committees. In most areas there was little attempt to extend branch meetings and picket-line activities beyond the hard core of activists. Even soup kitchens often involved only a minority of strikers. The main way in which the NUM leadership addressed its members was through occasional big rallies. These consisted of set-piece speeches from the NUM national and area leaders and from other trade union and Labour Party dignitaries. There was never any time for questions or comments from the floor. These were rallies to cheer the faithful, not meetings to thrash out problems or convince the waverers.

The NUM at national and local level made little attempt to go out and win the active support of the inactive majority. The failure to involve the Notts miners in the strike through a campaign to win a national ballot was the most catastrophic illustration of this failure. But it was a theme that endured through 12 months of strike action. In the militant areas the branch officials made few attempts to organise regular mass meetings to draw miners and the women in the mining communities into discussions of the day-to-day problems of the strike. Indeed officials often discouraged such initiatives when they were organised by groups of

Ask me no questions: Scargill rallied the faithful but never discussed the problems

activists or women's groups. Once the back-to-work drive gathered momentum, the officials became even more reluctant to organise meetings. They feared that if they got the miners together they might vote to go back. Rather than confront the growing spirit of resignation and combat these arguments, the officials ignored them and hoped they would go away. But like the Notts miners, the problem did not go away. It led inexorably to the situation on 27 February when a delighted coal board announced that 51 per cent of the miners were at work.

4. Solidarity stifled

At the end of the miners' strike there was a consensus that the miners had been betrayed by workers in other trade unions. Margaret Thatcher congratulated workers who had displayed their 'unity' with the scab miners by refusing appeals to take action in support of the strikers. Arthur Scargill blamed trade unionists who had failed to carry out TUC policy supporting the NUM for leaving the miners to fight alone.

It is true that the miners did not get the sort of solidarity action that they needed to win. Yet countless individuals and groups of workers took sympathetic action, often at considerable risk to their own jobs, to help advance the miners' cause. What were the problems facing activists in organising the sympathetic industrial action that was so vital to the miners' prospects of success?

'Save our industry'

The first problem the miners hit in their attempts to spread their strike was the commitment of key trade unions to the industry in which their members worked. The miners' strike was barely two weeks old when leaders of the electricians' union (EETPU), the general, municipal and boilermakers' union (GMBATU) and the electrical power engineers (EPEA) — the major unions in the electrical supply industry — got together to discuss the miners' strike. They advised their members to cross miners' picket lines outside the power stations.

These relatively secure unions put their loyalty to the relatively prosperous electrical supply industry before their loyalty to another group of workers whose futures were far from secure. The leaders of the power workers re-stated their position at the TUC conference in September and stuck to it consistently throughout the strike. They were not prepared to jeopardise their own position by taking industrial action in support of the miners. They played a crucial role in preventing the miners' strike from hitting electricity supplies to industry and the nation's homes.

Toothless wonders: NUM and traindrivers' leaders failed to make solidarity bite

The steelworkers' union put its industry first as well. Steel union leaders pointed to the weakness of the industry and the threat of imminent plant closures and redundancies. At the end of March ISTC leader Bill Sirs broke ranks from the Triple Alliance of coal, rail and steel unions when his union first came under pressure to back the miners. 'I am not here to see the steel industry crucified on someone else's altar', he told a meeting of his fellow union leaders. A series of wrangles ensued among representatives of all the unions involved in supplying coal and raw materials to steel plants at Ravenscraig in Scotland and Llanwern in South Wales. The end result was that steel production was scarcely affected and the Triple Alliance was left in ruins.

Sectional loyalties

Another obstacle to sympathy action was the sectional outlook that prevails among British trade unions. The dockers provided the clearest example of this weakness at the height of the miners' strike. In July dockers at Immingham came out on strike when the steel corporation used non-registered dock labour to unload iron ore destined for blacked steel plants. Dockers throughout the country immediately came out in solidarity. The transport and general workers' leaders had a tremendous opportunity to link up with the miners. But they chose to use the government's embarrassment at facing two big unions at once in the narrow interests of the TGWU dockers' section. When the employers agreed to uphold the terms of the National Dock Labour Scheme, which protects dockers' jobs, the TGWU recommended a return to work. The miners, whose jobs were as vulnerable as ever, were left out on a limb.

Sectionalism was not confined to the dockers. It was even stronger in other sections of the TGWU, among the lorry drivers and the oil tanker drivers. Both these groups of workers have won a reputation for militancy in the past. But the miners' strike offered them an opportunity for big extra earnings. Many were not ready to forego hard cash in the wider cause of working class solidarity. Other unions also had the chance to link up with the miners and increase the pressure on the government. Teachers, civil servants and railworkers all announced and called off industrial action while the miners were on strike. Each union chose to fight its own private battle. It was not surprising that they all lost.

Edicts and exhortations

The third difficulty in the way of winning sympathy action was the union leaders' bureaucratic style of leadership. Union leaders tried to deliver sympathy action by issuing edicts from head office. They exhorted their members not to cross picket lines as a matter of principle. Trade union conferences and rallies and gatherings of the Broad Left resounded to such appeals throughout the strike. Left-wing union leaders like Jimmy Knapp of the railworkers, Ray Buckton of the train drivers and Ron Todd of the TGWU made hundreds of speeches in this vein. These appeals would have been all very well if traditional trade union principles were widely respected among British trade unionists. The problem is that they are not.

For several years union officials have worked closely with the police to turn picket lines into tame demonstrations. Many workers have no particular scruples about crossing picket lines. The only way to stop them in the miners' strike was to persuade them to support the miners' cause. This meant union leaders getting out of their offices and discussing and arguing the case for the miners with ordinary union members. But this is anathema to the union chiefs.

Union leaders have little confidence in their ability to influence their members' actions. This is not surprising because they always try to justify their members' industrial action on the grounds that it is in the best interests of their industries. They found it so difficult to justify sympathy action that could only damage British industry during the miners' strike that they did not even try. Instead they issued instructions and pious declarations. This approach may have convinced a militant minority. But it left the more moderate majority unmoved. It allowed the more passive workers to gain influence and left the militants isolated.

Token gestures

Another key weakness in making sympathy action effective was the union leaders' preference for token gestures rather than hard-hitting industrial action. The approach of the rail unions to the delivery of coal from the Nottinghamshire coalfield to the local power stations illustrates this problem. Recognising the importance of Notts coal supplies to the power stations, striking Notts miners appealed to railworkers at the key Shirebrook depot to black coal movements.

Early in June NUR and Aslef officials instructed members to stop moving coal. Local branch meetings voted narrowly in favour of this policy. But the union leaders did not campaign actively to convince workers of the legitimacy of this tactic. Many failed to attend the crucial branch meetings and most crossed picket lines to go into work. British Rail bosses suspended the minority of workers who refused to man the coal trains. The unions' response was not to widen the scope of industrial action but to make up the wages of the suspended men.

The union leaders were content merely to make a gesture of support for the miners by calling for action and paying the wages of those who were disciplined as a result. They were in a position to strike a decisive blow at the supply of energy to industry and give the miners some real leverage against the government. But they made no serious attempt to do this. They settled for a well-publicised gesture and left the courageous rank and file railworkers at Shirebrook who continued their action until the end of the strike to battle on alone.

Several unions were in a strong position to help the miners but failed to do so because they were afraid to put themselves outside the law. The post office engineers could have pulled out the plugs on the coal board as they did on other customers in their own dispute in 1983. The civil service unions could have refused to restrict benefits to striking miners and made sure that they got the maximum allowances. But the influential Broad Left caucuses in these unions never even proposed such measures. This was not surprising as they also refused to challenge the law in their own disputes. The unions' deference to legality was another constraint on their capacity to deliver solidarity with the miners.

Rank and file solidarity

The remarkable feature of the miners' strike was that, given all the obstacles, so much sympathy action actually took place. This was testimony to the tremendous sympathy for the miners throughout the working class movement. The fact that diverse groups of workers were prepared to take action right up to the end of the dispute reveals what could have been achieved through a properly organised campaign to win rank and file action in the early stages of the strike. Here are just a few examples:

- **Power workers**

Workers at several power stations in the north voted to go beyond the TUC's vague 'solidarity guidelines'. They refused to handle any coal or oil coming into their stations.

- **Steelworkers**

At a plant meeting at Ravenscraig on 9 May half the workers were in favour of coming out in support of the miners. Union officials manoeuvred to prevent this idea from being discussed openly and voted upon and the majority of workers were finally swung behind the bureaucrats' treacherous position.

● **Railworkers**

In addition to the Shirebrook workers, railworkers at the Coalville depot in the Leicestershire coalfield blacked the movement of coal throughout the dispute. When workers in both depots were threatened with victimisation in early January railworkers came out on strike throughout the Midlands region and in some London stations. against the wishes of the union leaderships. This 24-hour strike was a significant expression of support for both the victimised railworkers and the miners. It was a good indication of the potential support for the miners even after 11 months of the strike.

● **Seamen**

Seamen in the north east refused to move coal to power stations for 11 months of the dispute. In February the High Court ruled their action illegal and the seamen's union leaders withdrew official backing. But their members still took unofficial action to prevent three coal ships leaving dock — an example of workers' willingness to defy the law in support of the miners.

Healthy support: NHS workers joined Yorkshire power station pickets

The condition for successful rank and file action was direct rank and file contact between miners and workers in the other unions. Whenever miners had the opportunity to explain their case person to person to other workers there was a real chance of winning support. Joint meetings among groups of rank and file workers were the key to success. Yet such initiatives were actively obstructed by the union leaders, including the leaders of the NUM. In April 1984 a meeting between rank and file miners and steelworkers was banned from a Scunthorpe pub. Yorkshire miners' vice-president Sammy Thompson distanced the NUM from the controversial forum, assuring the steel unions that he had 'never made any attempt' to talk to their members at Scunthorpe. In December and January, activists organised meetings and pickets to put the miners' case to Yorkshire power workers. North Yorkshire NUM agent Johnny Walsh denounced the picket organisers as 'extremists' and 'lice' in the press. Local miners' officials warned their members not to get involved in the unofficial campaign and hauled some who did in front of disciplinary committees. Officials descended on a picket of Ferrybridge power station, told the pickets to 'piss off' and informed watching police that the picket had nothing to do with the NUM — in other words, they were free to arrest who they liked.

In many instances militants who went out to persuade other workers to take industrial action found their proposals blocked by agreements among the union leaders to make exemptions and dispensations. At the steel plants union officials met to discuss quotas of coal supplies necessary to keep the furnaces burning, not how to block coal supplies. It was the same story at the big car factories such as BL's Longbridge plant or Ford's massive Dagenham factory. On the docks the TGWU made local deals with the steel corporation at Port Talbot and Hunterston. These arrangements allowed coal and iron ore to pass through registered ports using registered dock labour.

Many private suppliers of coal were given dispensations by the NUM on the grounds that their supplies were necessary for hospitals and old people. The practical effect of all these deals was to ensure virtual business as usual. In marked contrast to the 1972 and 1974 strikes, in 1984 most coal users, industrial or domestic, managed to get supplies for most of the strike. Meanwhile the leaders of all the unions involved proclaimed from public platforms that the support given by their union was 'second to none'. In the sense that the solidarity of all the unions was equally ineffective there was an element of truth in this claim.

Second to none?

At the end of the strike the NUM leadership bitterly denounced other unions for leaving the miners to fight alone. Yet the leadership of the NUM endorsed all the empty rhetoric and paper resolutions of support from the other union leaders throughout the strike. Scargill appeared at countless press conferences and rallies with the leaders of the rail and transport unions congratulating them on their bold declarations of support. He received a rapturous standing ovation at the TUC

conference in September as he acclaimed union leaders' empty promises of 'total support'. The NUM accepted the TUC's guidelines for support from the power workers which explicitly ruled out industrial action to disrupt electricity supplies and restricted picket lines to six people. The NUM, especially its area leaders, made numerous local deals authorising the movement of coal which helped to undermine the impact of the strike. If the other unions betrayed the miners it was a betrayal in which the NUM leadership was fully complicit.

The NUM leadership shares responsibility for the failures of solidarity because it shares the same bureaucratic mentality that prevails throughout the British trade union movement. All the failings we have listed in the unions that could have come to the miners' aid are also common to the NUM. The NUM too is committed to its industry. Scargill constantly repeated his commitment to the *Plan for Coal* and an expanding and efficient British coal industry throughout the strike. As long as every union was fighting for its own industrial sector there was little hope of them uniting to defend the working class.

The NUM is, if anything, an even more sectional union than most others. The miners' leaders often proclaimed the exemplary record of the NUM in supporting other workers in struggle. It is true that rank and file miners have responded positively on many occasions to appeals for support. But it is also true that the record of the NUM leadership is as bad as most Broad Left unions when it comes to delivering effective sympathy action. In the 1980 steel strike miners in South Wales, Yorkshire, Scotland and Kent actively supported the steelworkers. Yet the NUM leadership never organised the systematic blacking of the use of steel in the pits which continued throughout the dispute. The NUM leadership has followed a similar policy in most major disputes in recent years. One example stands out.

In November 1981 workers threatened with closure at the Laurence Scott factory in Manchester tried to close down their boss's parent company — Mining Supplies of Doncaster. They appealed to the NUM to black the firm's products. Scargill's response was to insist that only those lorries that had actually been seen crossing a picket line should be blacked. All other Mining Supplies products should be used. He restricted the blacking to a small proportion of the firm's products in a way which rendered it ineffectual and impossible to operate.

The NUM also shares the other union leaders' reluctance to consult its own members and win their support for industrial action. It was not surprising that the NUM leaders were unwilling to go out and persuade other workers to support the miners. It was the middle of January, almost 11 months into the dispute when it was far too late, that Scargill first spoke to rank and file power workers:

'I did ask the leaders of the major power unions if they would arrange meetings of shop stewards in the major power stations. Although there was no rejection of this idea it has not been put into operation.'

Given the hostility of the power union leaders to the miners' strike it would have been amazing if they had agreed to Scargill's request.

There was nothing to stop the NUM leaders from approaching shop stewards

and other workers directly. Indeed the miners' livelihoods depended directly on pursuing such contacts. But this approach would have breached the etiquette of the union bureaucracy, and this takes priority over the needs of the rank and file in the NUM as in other unions.

The NUM also shared the other unions' proclivity for token gestures. It backed a series of regional TUC 'days of action' during the strike. These were simply a substitute for any serious attempt to organise real sympathetic action. They were a bureaucratic face-saver that became increasingly pointless and demoralising for everybody involved as the strike dragged on. While many miners showed that they were ready to defy the police and the courts to defend their jobs, the NUM leadership was more equivocal in its defiance of the courts. The NUM leaders refused to back down before court declarations that the strike was unofficial and faced heavy financial penalties as a result. Yet they still resorted to the courts to resolve the internal union dispute with the Nottinghamshire area. The union leaders' deference to the judiciary confuses and disarms workers who face a concerted anti-union legal offensive.

All the characteristics of the other unions that helped to isolate the miners are also characteristics of the NUM. The failure of trade union solidarity in the miners' strike was not a failure of the rank and file. Ordinary workers showed a consistent readiness to back the miners when they were approached directly and persuaded by argument. The failure took place at the level of the union leadership, in the TUC, in the big unions and in the NUM. The lesson of the miners' strike is that to win effective sympathy action active workers need to throw out the bureaucratic outlook that dominates the existing unions and put the initiative in the hands of rank and file workers who have no stake in preserving the structures and procedures of the existing system.

5. The disaster area

In their motion to the 3 March national conference the Scottish delegates coupled opposition to an immediate return to work with a renewed call to expel the Nottinghamshire area from the NUM. The motion was defeated, just as the NUM leadership had earlier shelved its plans to kick the Notts miners out of the national union. But the Scottish proposal at the bitter end of the dispute reflected the deep hostility to the Notts area among NUM officials. Similar sentiments were widespread among rank and file militants in many areas.

The movement to expel Nottinghamshire did nothing to take the strike forward or to help carry on the struggle after the end of the strike. It simply made the Notts miners a scapegoat for the failure of the NUM leadership to unite the union and lead the battle for jobs to a successful conclusion. Instead of fighting to heal the divisions in the miners' ranks this measure promised to deepen and consolidate them. This could only further weaken the miners' union and strengthen the hand of the bosses.

The Notts problem

The Notts miners were a problem from the start of the strike. Their pits and jobs were more secure than those of other areas and they were traditionally more moderate. The first instinct of many Notts miners when the strike began in Yorkshire was to stay at work. But it was the policy of the NUM leadership that turned Nottinghamshire into a disaster area. Instead of going out and campaigning to win the support of the Notts miners for all-out strike action, the leadership at first endorsed the 'picketing out' tactic. But this failed to persuade many Notts miners to join the strike and saturation policing and road blocks soon made it impossible to continue this approach.

The NUM leadership's response to the failure of the Yorkshire miners to bludgeon the Notts miners into joining the strike was to give up. Instead of pushing even harder to win the hearts and minds of the Notts miners for a national strike,

the NUM leadership simply dismissed them with contempt. It endorsed the area-by-area strike strategy under Rule 41 of the NUM constitution. This allowed the divisions between the militant and moderate areas to deepen and appear to become insurmountable. The result was that the majority of the Notts miners stayed at work and the output of their pits rendered the national struggle for jobs ineffective. The NUM leadership sat back and blamed the Notts miners for all the failures of the strike.

The NUM leadership produced a series of explanations for the behaviour of the Notts miners. But the superficiality of these theories only exposed the weakness of the NUM leadership's position. (For a detailed account of the history of 'the Notts problem' see Frank Richards, *The miners' next step*, Junius, July 1984).

The first explanation was that the Notts miners were 'born scabs'. Many miners shared the view that the Notts miners were a breed apart. They were said to be congenitally distinct from miners in Yorkshire or Scotland or Kent. They were said to lack backbone and the will to fight. It is true that the Notts area has been generally more moderate than other areas. Yet the Notts miners have on occasions distinguished themselves by their militancy. This was the case in the big disputes of the early twenties. The Notts men also played an active part in the strikes of 1972 and 1974. Many 'Notts miners' are in fact immigrants from other coalfields. Far from being a race apart, many are related by blood to miners in Scotland, Durham and the north east. They lack the long and stable traditions of South Wales. But this is also true of the Kent miners, who have long been among the most militant in the NUM.

A second explanation for the Notts disease was that the Notts miners had been bought off by higher bonuses following the introduction of the area productivity scheme in the late seventies. Take home pay has been higher than in other areas. However, the differentials between Nottinghamshire and the other areas have narrowed since the introduction of the bonus schemes in 1977 and 1978. Detailed statistics published by Incomes Data Services in May 1984 show that bonuses in Nottinghamshire were higher than those of South Wales. But they also show that the bonuses were even bigger in the high productivity pits of the North Yorkshire and Barnsley areas. Yet these are counted as some of the NUM's most militant areas, while the Notts miners are condemned as corrupted labour aristocrats. The truth is that there is no direct correlation between wage levels and militancy.

The third explanation for the Notts anomaly is the legacy of George Spencer's breakaway union. This scab union recruited in the Notts coalfield in the decade after the defeat of the General Strike. The Spencer union derived its strength from the patronage of the employers. The employers were particularly powerful in the Notts area, especially in the new 'super pits' that were opened up in the twenties. They used the butty system of subcontracted labour to ensure their control in the pits. They also dominated the communities which were largely their own creations. The employers built the houses and shops, and even the churches and miners' welfares. Up to the forties the mine owners ran their own private police force to patrol the villages.

Spencerism was sponsored by the bosses and fought all the way by militants in

the miners' union. It was finally defeated in 1937 by a determined rank and file struggle based at Harworth colliery. Instead of helping the Notts miners to get rid of Spencerism for good, the national union leaders advised them to unite with Spencer's company union. The President of the new union was none other than George Spencer. It is worth looking more closely at the philosophy of Spencerism, not so much because it is peculiar to the Notts area, but because it provides a clue to understanding the outlook of the entire NUM bureaucracy.

The legacy of Spencerism was a close attachment between the miners' union in Nottinghamshire and the local mine owners. After nationalisation this link was carried over into the relations between union and management. The high profitability of the Notts coalfield encouraged this relationship. The bosses achieved high output levels and the union was secure in conditions of stable employment and high wages. The close collaboration of the Notts miners with the Notts coal board strengthened their sectional outlook and set them apart from miners in other areas.

This collaborationist outlook was common to right-wing and left-wing area leaders in the Notts area. Spencer himself was a former Labour MP. When he and his deputy retired in 1945 their places were taken by two members of the Communist Party. But it was business as usual in the day-to-day cooperation between union and management. Throughout the post-war years left wingers played a prominent role in the Notts leadership. Joe Whelan, another Communist Party member who died prematurely in 1982, was the best known. Whelan was as collaborative towards the employers and as sectional towards miners in other areas as the right-wing leaders. In 1966 he opposed the introduction of a national wage agreement in favour of divisive area negotiations. The decision of the Notts area to defy national NUM policy and negotiate an area productivity deal through the back door in 1977 was fully consistent with this sectional tradition.

The Notts leadership at the beginning of the 1984 strike inherited the legacy of collaboration. President Ray Chadburn represented the right and General Secretary Henry Richardson the left. One indication of the common ground

Long faces, short careers: deposed Notts leaders Chadburn and Richardson

between right and left and the links between both and management is the existence of a secret 'slush fund' in the Notts area, dating back to the days of Spencer. This fund is maintained by the employers for the purpose of purchasing favours for the union. It is administered by the Nottinghamshire District Wages Board, through Chadburn and Richardson and working miners Roy Lynk and David Prendergast. The fund pays out money for pensions, holidays and other welfare measures. It has also funded a £1200 dinner bill at a Nottinghamshire restaurant for an unspecified number of people, a further bill from Mansfield Brewery for £581 and another for a choir dinner costing £1892. None of the left-wing leaders in Nottinghamshire, from the Communist Party members of the forties to Richardson in the eighties, has ever objected to being the beneficiary of the bosses' patronage.

In the course of the strike Chadburn and Richardson were ousted from their positions in the Notts area by representatives of the working miners. Chadburn and Richardson at first opposed the strike and then succumbed to pressure from the national NUM to back it. They failed to give any lead to the Notts miners. When the majority finally opted to stay at work, they were left out on a limb. Their places were taken by Roy Lynk and David Prendergast, union officials who consistently identified with the working miners. The new Notts leaders are not much different from the men they replaced. Both are long-serving trade union officials and traditional Labour Party supporters. In December they dissociated the Notts area from the Tory-backed National Working Miners Committee, the hardline scab outfit which won some influence in the area.

Class collaboration and sectionalism are by no means peculiar to the Notts area. Indeed these policies prevail in all areas of the NUM. The only difference between the Notts area and the other regions is that collaboration and sectionalism are more deeply entrenched here than elsewhere. But the problem lies not so much with the Notts miners as with the leadership of the NUM which continues to uphold the policy of collaboration. This was why the NUM leadership could not face up to the Notts problem at the beginning of the strike.

Backing off from the ballot

The problem that confronted the NUM leadership at the end of the second week of the miners' strike was that the militant areas were out but the moderate areas, especially Nottinghamshire, were still at work. The question was how to get them out, given that the picketing out strategy had failed. The Notts miners could be divided into three categories. There was a militant minority of miners who came out on strike in response to appeals from Yorkshire. Many of these stayed out for the next 12 months in the face of the most bitter isolation and brutality from police and scabs. The Notts strikers proved to be some of the NUM's most courageous militants. There was also a hard core of scabs in the Notts area. Some of these were later organised by shadowy right-wing politicians and journalists into various scab committees backed by substantial sums of Tory money. The vast majority of Notts miners fell into a variety of uncertain and shifting positions between these extremes.

The only way to win the passive majority for the strike was to launch an aggressive campaign around a national ballot. To succeed, such a campaign would

On strike but on their own: union strategy isolated Notts strikers

have had to tackle the ideology of class collaboration. It would need to set aside all attempts to justify the miners' strike on the grounds that it was in the best interests of the British coalmining industry. These economic arguments made no sense at all to the Notts miners. Anybody could see that there was a basic conflict between the miners' determination to save jobs and the employers' determination to make coalmining profitable. It was obvious to the Notts miners that a national strike would be damaging to the coal industry in Britain and in Nottinghamshire. They could never be persuaded to accept the view that a strike was good for the relatively prosperous Notts coal industry.

Yet there was a good chance that the Notts miners could be persuaded to support a strike that was presented as being in the interests of the working class. Arguments based on economics inevitably divided miners in the areas which seemed to have a brighter future from miners in areas threatened with mass closures. They reinforced the problems of sectionalism. Arguments which appealed to the interests of every worker in defending the right of every other worker to a job and a decent standard of living could have united miner with miner and miners with workers in other industries. A campaign in which rank and file activists toured the Notts coalfield to take these arguments directly to the Notts miners could have won an overwhelming majority for national strike action. A victorious national ballot campaign would have provided a solid foundation on which to take the strike forward. It would have maximised the influence of the militants over the rest of the miners and it would have marginalised the scabs. It would have united the miners and allowed the militants to concentrate their energies on halting the power stations. A united NUM would have had much greater authority in appealing for sympathetic strike action from other unions. Most importantly of all, a successful campaign around a national ballot would have taken control over the direction of

the dispute out of the hands of the NUM bureaucrats and put it in the hands of the rank and file. The area-by-area strategy paralysed rank and file initiative and ensured tight bureaucratic control. It acted as a barrier to the rank and file coordination at national level that was essential to take the strike forward.

Some Tory and right-wing Labour politicians recommended a national ballot because they reckoned that they could win a vote against an all-out national strike. They were confident of their ability to influence rank and file miners through the media. They were sure they could persuade a majority to vote against the strike. On the other hand, the NUM leadership and most of the Labour left and its camp followers opposed a national ballot. They feared that the result would be against a national strike. They were not at all confident in their ability to persuade rank and file miners to vote for a strike.

The NUM leaders' lack of confidence was understandable. In the 18 months before the 1984 strike they had lost three national ballots over proposals for strike action. They doubted the capacity of their economic arguments to convince moderate miners in Nottinghamshire or anywhere else why they should join the national strike. Their response was to endorse the action taken by the militant areas, where no persuasion was necessary, and to dodge the rest by manipulating the union rule book to avoid holding a national ballot. The result of this policy was to ensure that coal flowed out of Nottinghamshire for the duration of the miners' strike. It also left the militant minority in Nottinghamshire to battle on alone and allowed the influence of the scabs to extend among the mass of Notts miners.

The left's endorsement of the NUM leaders' bureaucratic treatment of the Notts problem was even more understandable. The British left is so accustomed to winning victories by manipulating paper majorities at union and party conferences that it has little experience of conducting arguments in the real world. Like the NUM leadership the left preferred the security of going it alone with the militant areas to the uncertainty of campaigning to win mass support. And like the NUM leadership, the left lacked a strategy that could win the majority support of miners in Nottinghamshire or anywhere else. The NUM leadership's justifications for its refusal to hold a ballot, which were dutifully parrotted by the left, only exposed the feebleness of its position. Every NUM official insisted that 'no man has the right to vote away another man's job'. This sounded good as a declaration of principle. But the decision not to hold a ballot effectively gave the Notts miners a veto over the whole national struggle for jobs. Spouting principles may be good for the soul, but it is not practical politics. The NUM leaders preferred to indulge their own affinity for asserting fine principles rather than pursue the hard arguments to persuade people who did not share their principles why they should support the strike.

Others insisted that the Notts miners would not have come out on strike even if a national ballot had gone in favour of all-out action. In fact this prejudice flew in the face of the record of the Notts area in supporting national NUM strike action. More importantly, however, it revealed a fatalistic attitude to the prospects of united strike action. Whether or not the Notts miners would have come out is uncertain. Powerful forces pulled them both for and against a strike. It was a matter that could only have been decided in the course of an intense political struggle. It was clear, however, that without a ballot the Notts miners would never come out.

It was already obvious by the second week of the strike that the Notts miners intended to stick by NUM traditions and refuse to strike without a ballot. Winning a ballot was the only way to get Notts out and it was the only hope of winning an effective national strike. The refusal to hold a ballot meant an admission of defeat

The truth that NUM leaders refused to face

at the very outset. The NUM leaders could have a miners' strike of sorts under Rule 41. But without a national strike, without the support of the key Notts area, the prospects of winning were slim indeed.

What evidence is there that a national ballot could have been successful? There were many indications that the Notts miners could have been won to support a national strike. The fact that they maintained the overtime ban almost to the very end of the miners' strike shows that they retained some loyalty to their comrades in the rest of the NUM. This spirit of loyalty was also apparent in the resistance of many working miners in Nottinghamshire to the exclusion of the Notts area from the national NUM. When they were faced with the threat of expulsion in January most wanted to stay with the national union. The fact that this loyalty was still evident after 11 months of bitterness between Notts working miners and the NUM strikers indicates what might have been achieved through a determined campaign in the early days of the strike.

The majority of Notts miners are not scabs. It was the bureaucratic approach of the NUM leadership that turned the Notts problem into a monster. If the Notts breakaway becomes permanent it will be a lasting blow to the miners' unity. Even if the Notts area is taken back into the national union, which seems the most likely outcome, the scars resulting from the strike will take many years to heal. The process can be accelerated if miners block attempts to scapegoat the Notts miners and tackle the twin evils of collaboration and sectionalism that have long weakened both the Notts area and the whole of the NUM.

6. The Scargill factor

On Tuesday 5 March Arthur Scargill stood at the head of a march of miners returning to work at Barrow colliery in Yorkshire at the end of the strike. The returning miners were met by a handful of pickets from Armthorpe at the entrance to the pit. Without hesitation Scargill acknowledged the pickets and ordered the miners to turn around and stay on strike for another day. This minor incident on the morning of the official return to work after 12 months on strike sums up the whole style of Scargill's leadership.

Unlike most union leaders Scargill values union solidarity. His gesture towards the Armthorpe pickets on the day designated by the NUM leadership for the return to work was consistent with his militant approach. This feature of his presidency of the NUM has won him the respect and loyalty of his members. But the incident at Barrow also revealed Scargill's central weakness: The lead came not from Scargill, but from the Armthorpe pickets. If Scargill was a rank and file miner this would not be a problem. But as the miners' national President his job is not to respond to local

King Arthur holds court: Scargill's militant approach won miners' loyalty

initiatives but to provide national leadership. It should not be necessary for ordinary miners from Yorkshire or anywhere to mount initiatives when they are part of a national union with a national leadership. Scargill's gesture at Barrow was not an isolated incident. Throughout the 12 month strike Scargill has provided leadership at the rhetorical level while leaving the practical responsibility for the conduct of the strike to the areas. When the strike ended Scargill continued to make defiant speeches. He also continued to evade responsibility for recommending the course of action that the miners should pursue. Scargill boasted that 'the fight goes on' and predicted that 'guerrilla war' would rage in the coalfields. What he was really saying was that it was now up to each individual pit to carry on the struggle. Far from giving a lead Scargill passed the buck back to isolated groups of miners to continue resistance to victimisations and pit closures.

Problems of leadership

The Tories and the media, and right wingers in the TUC and the Labour Party, have criticised Scargill for being a bad general. They have accused him of being too unyielding and too unwilling to make compromises. In fact these characteristics are the most positive features of Scargill's style of leadership. These criticisms only add to the confusion about Scargill's role in the strike. From the start of the strike there was a gulf between Scargill's words and his deeds. In his speeches he promised victory. But what action did he take to fulfil these promises? At the outset Scargill and the NUM executive maintained the fiction that the strike was not their responsibility because it had been called by the NUM's areas under Rule 41 of the union's rulebook. It took six precious weeks before the national leadership formally took responsibility for the conduct of the strike.

Instead of running the strike in the crucial early weeks, Scargill played the role of barrister. While miners' picket lines were being smashed in the biggest paramilitary police operation this century, the miners' leader was in a London courtroom quibbling with lawyers about how the NUM's pension funds were invested. The High Court judge congratulated Scargill on his splendid performance, before making his judgement against the union. Meanwhile the miners fought on without effective leadership or coordination against a police operation controlled from the top level 'national reporting centre'. The result was that the miners lost the initiative at the most important stage of the strike.

The pattern set in the early days continued throughout the summer of 1984. Instead of leading and organising the miners, Scargill passed the time in an endless round of negotiations. The striking miners were reduced to the role of spectators keenly awaiting the outcome of the latest round of talks. As the strike came to revolve entirely around talks, action came to a virtual standstill. If the strike lacked leadership before the talks, once the talks were underway it lost all direction. Picketing became even more chaotic and miners were offered nothing in the way of a strategy. Scargill's leadership amounted to little more than his repeated protestations that 'we'll stay out as long as it takes'.

Scargill attempted to compensate for his lack of leadership by manipulating the

NUM rulebook. The conviction that it was easier to change the union's constitution than to fight the bosses united the entire national executive. At every critical moment in the strike Scargill's answer was to change the union's rules.

In April the crucial problem was how to win the support of the Notts miners and ensure the unity of the strike. Yet the NUM's special delegate conference could do nothing more than propose a rule change to lower the majority required to win a strike ballot. The same approach prevailed at the NUM's conference in August. The strike was six months old but it was still not putting serious pressure on the bosses and there were already signs that a back-to-work movement was gathering support. The NUM leadership's solution was to change the rules to extend the union's disciplinary powers.

It was the same in January when the strike had reached a desperate stage. Miners were flocking back to work and, despite the winter, power cuts seemed as far away as ever. Scargill's response was to announce plans to restructure the national executive and to recommend the expulsion of the Nottinghamshire area. Every special conference or executive meeting became a diversion from the strike. Every rule change was an excuse for avoiding real problems and the action required to tackle them.

Scargill remained true to form to the end. 'If an amnesty is not granted', he declared, 'there will be no peace in the coalfields'. These were fine words, but the miners' leader had nothing practical to say about how the union intended to continue the fight to defend the victimised miners or to resist pit closures.

If Scargill was simply a weak leader there would be no point discussing his evasions. The real problem is that after 12 months of evasions he managed to shift

Scargill's sidekicks: Heathfield and McGahey

the blame for the defeat of the strike on to the backs of rank and file workers. At first the Notts miners were the scapegoats. Later workers in other unions were blamed for leaving the miners in the lurch. In the closing weeks of the strike the leadership pointed the accusing finger at miners who had been starved back to work. In fact the blame lies entirely with the NUM leaders. They did nothing to campaign to win the support of the Notts miners. They never tried to consult rank and file steelworkers, dockers, power workers or transport workers. They did nothing to confront the growing demoralisation that produced the drift back to work in the coalfields.

The Scargill problem is not confined to the NUM. It has become fashionable among union leaders to pin the blame for their failure to lead on the reluctance of the rank and file to follow. This cynical posturing creates a legacy of mistrust and recrimination and further divides the working class. It is vital that in the aftermath of the miners' strike militants should resist the search for scapegoats. Miners' anger and resentment should be directed against those whom they elected to lead their union and who shirked their responsibility to lead in the strike.

Scargillism

The miners' strike has given rise to the concept of 'Scargillism'. This term is used by right-wing and left-wing commentators alike to explain the role of the NUM leader in the strike. For the Tories and the media the object is to blame the miners' militancy on a convenient target. The left wing of the labour movement identifies the valiant struggle of the miners and the mining communities with the personality of one man. Both versions mystify the true course of events by reducing the fighting spirit of the miners to the influence of one individual.

We need not waste space exposing the slanders of the media and the right. Every militant has nothing but contempt for the lies of the British establishment. The left's version of events is a bigger problem. Left-wing Labour politicians and factions inside the Labour Party have devoted their energies to keeping Scargill's reputation intact. Even left-wing groupings outside the Labour Party which had no inhibitions about criticising the NUM's area leaders made Scargill a special case.

The fiction that Scargill was a hostage of the area leaders gained widespread currency. According to some left-wing papers the lack of organisation and the reluctance to coordinate picketing resulted from area leaders sabotaging Scargill's efforts. In reality Scargill was far from being a reluctant victim of the NUM leadership. The NUM President enjoyed enormous popularity and intense loyalty among striking miners. There can be no doubt that if Scargill had chosen to mobilise striking miners he would have succeeded irrespective of the wishes of the area leaders. Scargill's decision to allow the area leaders to dissipate militancy was consistent with his whole bureaucratic strike strategy. Why is the left so determined to save the reputation of the NUM President? Why is it that left-wing factions which are usually at each other's throats have all come together behind Scargill?

Scargill combines working class appeal with a fervent commitment to the politics of Labourism. Since the turn of the century the Labour Party has pursued the

interests of the trade unions on the political front — in Parliament. The leaders of both the trade union and the political wings of the labour movement have accepted the framework established by the capitalist system as defining the limits of their industrial and political activities. Labourism is the politics of collaboration between capital and labour in the workplace and in wider society.

There are right-wing and left-wing traditions within Labourism. The right, from Ramsay MacDonald to Roy Hattersley, openly acknowledges its allegiance to the capitalist class and its distaste for the class struggle. The left, from Keir Hardie to Denis Skinner, openly admits its distaste for the capitalists and its sympathies for the working class. Yet because the left ultimately prefers the continuation of the existing system to the struggle necessary to get rid of it, it always succumbs to the right. For the first time in decades the Labour left and its allies have discovered in Scargill a powerful and charismatic working class leader.

Scargill is unique among modern trade union and Labour Party leaders in his ability to inspire working class people. He puts the miners' case forcefully and

Shining light of the left: Scargill makes Labourism appeal to workers

articulately on television. He is not intimidated by the media and does not adopt the cringing and defensive tone typical of trade union leaders. He is a fiery public orator. Yet Scargill's militant rhetoric never goes beyond the bounds of Labourism. Indeed he has provided a major boost to the flagging fortunes of the Labour left. He was the hero of last year's Labour Party conference and he remains the darling of the left. Scargill's commitment to Labourism also explains the failures of his leadership.

As a militant trade union leader Scargill rejected the argument that pits could be closed on economic grounds. Time and again he insisted that he would not move a fraction on the issues of jobs and pit closures. 'If I am the last person left rejecting the closure plan', he declared, 'then that will be my position'. This uncompromising

stand earned him enormous support in mining communities which have already been decimated by closures. Yet as a leading trade union bureaucrat Scargill was restricted by his political loyalty to Labourism. Hence he ended up in the paradoxical position of trying to justify his rejection of pit closures on economic grounds.

Throughout the first half of the strike Scargill lectured constantly on the economics of British coalmining. He produced numerous arguments to promote the British coal industry and boasted in every television interview that 'we produce the cheapest deep-mined coal in the world'. Scargill's economic arguments were repeated by every NUM official and became the central plank in the miners' case.

In fact Scargill's economic lectures contradicted the NUM's rejection of pit closures on economic grounds. If, as Scargill rightly said in one breath, economic issues were irrelevant, then why come out with economic arguments in the next? If the issue was jobs and the future of mining communities, then why all the intricate discussions of the state of the coal board's markets, sales and accounts? Having thrown out the coal board's attempt to justify its pit closure programme on economic grounds, the NUM leadership turned round and tried to use economic arguments to justify its strike action.

Scargill's preoccupation with the economics of coal production was not simply an unfortunate error in presentation. It was symptomatic of a general approach. Following the tradition of Labourism, the NUM leadership identified the well being of its members with the future of the coalmining industry. This tradition of collaboration between employers and trade unions has long been established in the British coalmining industry. It is enshrined in numerous joint management and union bodies and agreements from the colliery review procedure to the 1974 *Plan for Coal*. The problem with this approach is that it equates the interests of miners with those of their industry. But there can be no common ground between employer and worker, the exploiter and the exploited.

The fact that British coal mines are nationalised does not alter the basic relationship between management and workers.The coalmining industry is not owned by miners but by the capitalist state. All Scargill's talk about 'our industry' simply distracts the NUM from the single-minded pursuit of miners' interests. Whatever the economic position of the industry, miners have a right to work and to enjoy a decent standard of living. Emphasis on the economics of coal makes the realisation of miners' objectives contingent on the state of the industry. All the debates about how to interpret the *Plan for Coal* are irrelevant to the needs of miners. In fact they are worse than irrelevant because they subordinate miners' interests to those of the industry.

In the sphere of economics only the capitalists can win. In capitalist society what makes good sense usually means more sacrifices for the working class. The NUM's faith in an expanding coal industry ignores the reality of capitalist society. Under the capitalist system an expanding coal industry simply means more coal production by fewer miners. The introduction of new computerised mining systems, such as the MINOS system at Selby, will lead to higher output at the expense of miners' jobs.

The collaborationist approach of the NUM leadership is not only ineffective, it also disorganises the working class. Collaboration with the bosses divides workers along sectional lines. Why should dockers or power workers care about the mining industry? They have their own industries to worry about. If there are any funds available for investment they want them for their own industry. The NUM's economic arguments had no resonance outside the mining communities. If the NUM had appealed to workers' class interests then it would have had a solid basis on which to build unity. Workers in all industries have a common interest in saving jobs, fighting for a better life and weakening the power of the exploiters.

The collaborationist approach also had a divisive impact within the mining communities. The Nottinghamshire miners took the argument a step further than the NUM leadership. They reckoned that the coal industry was reasonably secure in their area and was paying decent wages. They argued that going on strike would only jeopardise the position of 'their' industry. The NUM leadership could not convincingly challenge this view with its own economic arguments. The Notts area simply took the NUM's collaborationist argument to its logical conclusion. Scargill was reduced to moralistic appeals and threats of disciplinary action, neither of which cut any ice with the Notts miners.

Consultation is the key

As the strike headed towards defeat the implications of the NUM's policy of collaboration became clear. From September onwards all the discussion centred on finding an acceptable form of words to replace the term 'uneconomic pit'. Instead of fighting for every job the NUM negotiating team became exclusively concerned with coming up with any deal which did not include the term 'uneconomic pit'.

The worst charge that the NUM could make against the coal board was that it was not prepared to collaborate. Towards the end of the strike the NUM leaders emphasised that even if they could not prevent the closure of pits, they could at least insist that they should be consulted. By February both sides accepted that pits would close. The only argument was over how openly the NUM leaders were prepared to admit their sell-out and what precise form the closure procedure should take. In the end the coal board bosses put a stop to the whole charade by making clear that they were no longer interested in collaboration and had no intention of seriously consulting the NUM leaders. The last phase of negotiations revealed everything about the nature of Scargillism. Scargill showed that his commitment to industrial collaboration overrode his opposition to pit closures. The NUM reluctantly accepted that it could not hold out on pit closures but it was not prepared to give ground on the issue of consultation. During the last two months of the strike the NUM leaders stood firm on nothing more than the plea that they should be consulted before pits were shut.

The simple fact that miners were kept out on strike for an extra two months while the NUM leaders fought for the right to be consulted by management says a lot about the Scargill style of leadership. At the end of the day Scargill's bureaucratic position came before the interests of his members. The rights of union leaders to be

consulted came before the rights of miners to work. Scargill was no hostage of the area leaders, but a hostage to his own reluctance to break with the ways of a union bureaucrat.

The NUM's failure of leadership cannot be reduced to one man. The central explanation for the defeat of the strike lies in the policy of collaboration. The defeat of the miners' strike carries a crucial lesson for the working class. Miners and other workers can fight and they can win. But even the most magnificent struggle can be defeated unless it is waged around working class policies. The miners do not need good lawyers or economists or accountants. They need leaders who will lead, who will take direct responsibility for giving a lead and who will fight for nothing less than the interests of the working class.

7. Facing the future

At the end of the miners' strike two questions are uppermost in many workers' minds. The first is often asked in a mood of near despair following the defeat of the labour movement's strongest section — 'If the miners can't beat the Tories what chance has anybody else got?'. The second indicates the beginning of the search for new solutions — 'If the existing leadership of the labour movement won't fight who will?'. Let's look at the prospects for the class struggle and examine some of the alternatives currently on offer.

Prophets of doom

The defeat of the miners is a setback for the entire labour movement. It has given the employers and the establishment at least a temporary advantage over the working class. It will give them greater confidence to push ahead with schemes to rationalise industry and services at workers' expense. It will also encourage the bosses to inflict further penalties on the labour movement through its anti-union legislation. The miners' defeat may well lead to other setbacks in the months ahead, as unemployment rises and trade union resistance becomes more fragmented. The unfavourable balance of forces resulting from the bosses' victory over the miners will undoubtedly intensify a sense of demoralisation among many workers. Some will inevitably draw the conclusion that it is impossible to fight back and that there is no hope for the working class movement.

Ironically the spirit of defeatism and pessimism is often strongest among those who have been most bombastic during the miners' strike. Politicians who publicly proclaimed that the miners were on the verge of a historic triumph in the closing weeks of the strike, and who pronounced the final outcome a great victory for the working class, display in their actions a complete lack of confidence in the prospects for the working class. They are already talking of the return of a Labour government in the late eighties as the only hope of turning the tide against the bosses' onslaught. Their faith in a Labour government in the distant future betrays

their lack of faith in the working class in the present. There will be many Labour politicians who will privately nod in agreement when academics and pundits pontificate that the 1984-85 miners' strike marked the demise of the working class.

The miners' strike itself gave the lie to all the prophets of doom who have been arguing for years that 'the working class is dead' or that 'the forward march of labour has been halted'. Less than 12 months before the miners' strike began the Labour Party's landslide general election defeat was widely attributed to the fact that the traditional working class had been replaced by a mass of mortgage-paying, car-owning, video-watching, *Sun*-reading, non-striking moderates. The highly paid miners were held up as the classic example of a once militant proletarian vanguard whose younger generation had been bought off, tamed and incorporated into Thatcher's Britain. The miners' strike shattered all these myths. It showed that miners, young and old, were ready to risk everything in a life or death battle against the combined forces of Thatcher's Britain. It confirmed that the working class is very much alive and kicking.

Raising the stakes

The miners' strike also showed that workers were ready to rise to the political challenge thrown down by the establishment. At every stage in the strike the Tories raised the stakes in a propaganda war against the miners. The miners' response revealed their willingness to reject some of the most deeply cherished values of capitalist society in the cause of defending working class interests. Thatcher and her ministers repeatedly accused the miners of denying the principles of law and order. The miners' reply was that if it was necessary to fight the police and defy the courts to defend their jobs and communities then they would not hesitate to do it. Thatcher accused the miners of being 'the enemy within', of being on a par with the British state's enemies abroad — General Galtieri's Argentina or Colonel Gadaffi's Libya. Many miners proudly displayed badges declaring themselves 'the enemy within' and refused to back down from their challenge to the government.

The Tories tried to intimidate the miners by making out that the strike was not an ordinary industrial dispute, but a political threat to the elected government and a threat to democracy itself. The government's propaganda campaign reached its peak in October at the time of the IRA bomb attack on the Tory Party conference in Brighton. Thatcher seized the moment to draw a direct parallel between the IRA bombers and the NUM pickets. 'Britain', she told the conference on the morning after the blast, 'faces now what is probably the most testing crisis of our time — the battle between the extremists and the rest'. She demanded 'the unswerving support of every law-abiding citizen' for 'our institutions of justice, the courts and the police'. But 'the extremists' in the coalfields remained unbowed. Many expressed a new sympathy with the Irish liberation struggle and carried on their own defiance of British law and order.

The miners' response to the Tories' propaganda barrage was, in the words of one Yorkshire miner, 'if that's the way they want it then that's the way they'll have to take it'. If the Tories wanted to turn the strike into a class war then the miners were

ready to fight a class war. This attitude was a serious shock to the British establishment. In the past when it has widened the scope of an industrial conflict in this way the establishment has always been able to rely on trade unionists to back down. The labour movement's deference to the principles of the rule of law and British democracy has always been one of the bosses' most powerful weapons for keeping the working class in line. But just as the stakes were high for the Tories in the miners' strike they were also high for the miners. They were not just fighting for a wage rise. They were fighting for their jobs, for their communities, for their union and their class.

The miners' spirited class response to the Tories' class war propaganda meant that the government had to pay a much higher price than it expected to beat the miners. They came out on top in the end, but only at the cost of using some of their heaviest political and ideological artillery. This approach deepened class antagonisms in British society and revealed more openly than ever before the anti-working class character of 'our institutions of justice'. The police were exposed as nothing more than the paid thugs of the coal board. The judges were revealed as functionaries who made up the law as they went along to suit the employers' requirements. The democracy of the British Parliament appeared to be little more than a façade for the dictates of the capitalist class. These conclusions were drawn not only by miners but by many other workers who followed the course of the miners' struggle with deep concern.

Living in the past

The growing social polarisation resulting from the introduction of a wider political dimension into the miners' strike alarmed establishment figures such as the Earl of Stockton and the Bishop of Durham. They recognised that Thatcher was pursuing a high-risk strategy. Given the precarious plight of British capitalism, the government had no option but to throw everything at the miners to win a decisive victory. But the establishment dissidents warned of the greater social conflict and instability that would inevitably result. Their solution, which found favour with the leadership of the labour movement, was to return to the good old days of industrial harmony and consensus politics. The modern Tory leadership knows that those days are gone forever. As the British economy slides into ruin the Tories know that there is no alternative to class warfare to save the capitalist class. The miners' courageous stand against the Tory onslaught showed that they too recognised that class struggle was their only hope.

The prophets of doom have got it all wrong. The problem is not that the working class is not ready to fight or that workers are unwilling to take on the bosses on a wide political front. The problem is that while workers are moving forward to fight the battles of the eighties they are held back by the politics of the past. The miners fought to save jobs in 1984 and 1985, but their leaders held firm to a programme written in 1974, in a different epoch. The miners fought to keep pits open irrespective of their economic viability for the coal board. Yet the *Plan for Coal* tied the NUM to a commitment to the measures necessary to make coalmining

profitable. The miners fought the police on picket lines, yet many accepted the view that their viciousness arose, not from the fact that they were all agents of the capitalist state, but from the fact that they were specialist riot squads drafted in from other areas. Many miners were put on the defensive by the Tories' propaganda campaign. Many rank and file miners did not hesitate to intimidate scabs and to tackle the police. But many officials condemned militants for taking elementary physical steps to make the strike more effective. At the end of the dispute some were ready to go along with the bosses' distinctions between miners victimised for 'violent crimes' and those sacked for less serious offences. Others backed down before press campaigns about the NUM's alleged 'Libya connections'. Instead of dismissing these allegations with contempt and upholding the NUM's right to accept funds from any source, some miners capitulated to the chauvinist prejudice against the Gadaffi regime. At some rallies in support of the miners official speakers tried to defend the NUM against charges of being 'the enemy within'. They proclaimed the service record of mining communities in Britain's war against Argentina and even in its occupation of Ireland.

The experience of the class struggle forced miners to question many things they had previously taken for granted. But the struggle itself did not answer all their questions. It provoked a break with the methods of the past, but one that was partial and often not fully conscious. Thus many miners who were prepared to fight the police on picket lines were not ready to go all the way in defending miners' right to use violence. Many blamed the riot police but accepted the local bobby. Many miners were prepared to go to any lengths to fight pit closures, but did not object to the outlook of the *Plan for Coal* which accepts closures as inevitable. The miners fought an uncompromising struggle themselves but did not challenge the compromising position of the NUM leaders in talks.

The miners' strike confirmed that the working class can fight the system. It also revealed that it lacks the leadership and the policies to win. The miners' strike did mark the end of an era. But the era that ended was the era of narrow trade union conflict within the framework established in the period of expansion and stability following the Second World War. The era that the miners' strike has opened up is one of more open and direct class struggle. This will be an era in which the risks will be greater and the penalties for failure higher. But the rewards will also be greater. The ruling class has been forced to go on the attack because its system is in danger. To safeguard its position it has been forced to abandon the buffers between capital and labour that it has built up over decades. The miners have shown how to make a start in fighting back.

Alternatives

The TUC leaders' trip to No 10 Downing Street in the dying days of the miners' strike summed up the irrelevance of the official labour movement. Norman Willis and the rest were so pleased at getting tea and biscuits and a friendly reception from Margaret Thatcher that they almost forgot about the miners' strike. While they looked forward to future consultations with the Prime Minister they scarcely

commented on her intransigent refusal to make the slightest concession to the miners. The TUC leaders crawled off to try to cobble together the terms of a final surrender between the NUM and the coal board. It was an appropriate finale to a 12-month struggle to get the miners back to work and limit the damage caused by the strike to the prestige of the TUC.

The leadership of the Labour Party played an equally ignominious role. For the party that claims to represent the working class the fact that working class people were taking action to defend their livelihoods was nothing but an embarrassment. Kinnock's sole concern in the early stages of the strike was to use the influence of the Labour Party to mediate between the NUM and the coal board. Shadow minister and veteran left winger Stan Orme pursued Kinnock's quest to settle the strike on any terms. But Orme had no more success with the coal board than Willis had in Downing Street. The bosses were not interested in the message carriers of the official labour movement. They felt confident that, with a little help from 20 000 riot police and some friendly judges and journalists, they could deal with the miners themselves.

The TUC and the Labour leaders emerged with little credit from the dispute. The only time they spoke with any authority or conviction was when they were condemning miners for using militant tactics. But many miners and other workers had little confidence in the official labour movement even before the strike began. Both during the strike and even more urgently after it was over, many workers were looking for some alternative to the existing leadership of the labour movement. What were their options? The most plausible alternative to the right-wing leadership of the labour movement is the movement's well-established left. At every official rally in the miners' strike Labour left politicians made platform speeches. Tony Benn and Denis Skinner, both MPs from mining areas, were the most prominent. Left-wing papers and activists echoed militants' hostility to Kinnock and promoted the view that a Labour Party under a different, left-wing, leadership would have played a different role in the dispute. Now that the strike is over the left will try to channel workers' anger at the betrayal of the miners into its campaign to revive and transform the Labour Party. But will replacing the Labour right by the Labour left transform the Labour Party into a force that can advance the interests of the working class? A look at the left's alternative in the miners' strike shows that it will not.

The central problem of the miners' strike was the NUM leadership's bureaucratic strategy and its tradition of collaboration. The problem with the left was that it backed this strategy and this tradition all the way. Benn and Skinner played no independent part in the dispute. Their only role on miners' platforms was to echo Scargill's bluster and promote the Labour Party. Benn gave some of his familiar history lessons and Skinner told a few jokes. They made no attempt to influence the NUM's strategy, no attempt to tackle any of the problems of the dispute and no attempt to give the struggle a wider political dimension. This would have been all very well if the NUM's strategy was capable of uniting and leading the miners forward, if the strike had been on an untroubled course to victory and if political leadership had not been vital to success. Instead of alternative leadership the left

offered homilies and music hall turns.

The wider left both inside and outside the Labour Party trailed along behind Benn and Skinner. Their papers provided a constant cover-up job for the leadership of the NUM. They either openly endorsed or ignored the economic arguments that undermined the possibilities of unity among the miners and between the miners and other workers. They endorsed Scargill's every twist and turn no matter how damaging his tactics were to the miners' cause. Whatever justification he produced for his bureaucratic conduct of the strike, from his refusal to hold a ballot to the final sell-out, Scargill could rely on the left to repeat it.

Scargill's cheer-leaders

When Scargill spent week after week in talks the left was silent. When he wasted valuable time in the courts and gave legitimacy to legal interference in the affairs of the labour movement by taking court action against the Notts area, the left looked the other way. When Scargill waved aloft meaningless resolutions of support at the TUC and elsewhere the left joined in the applause. When Scargill gave up on pit closures and the victimised miners, the left had no comment. When Scargill shuffled the blame off on Willis and the other union leaders the left joined the chorus of name-calling.

The left also followed the NUM leadership in ignoring the difficulties the miners faced in their efforts to make the strike effective. The NUM leaders dismissed the Notts miners and almost a third of the union's members as incorrigible scabs. The left did not demur. Scargill produced figures which proved there was no back-to-work movement and they duly appeared in all the left's papers. Everybody who went on a miners' picket line knew the extent of miners' frustration at the lack of proper organisation of the strike at local level. Everybody knew that behind the transport unions' declarations of 'total support', coal and oil and everything else necessary to make the miners' strike ineffective was moving round the country almost unhindered. But the left had nothing to say about these matters either.

The left's actions were no better than its omissions. Labour Party-sponsored support groups in many areas turned basic solidarity activity into a means of de-politicising the strike. Many people became involved in these groups because they wanted the miners to win. In itself the collection of food and money was a useful contribution to the miners' struggle. But the miners needed much more than subsistence rations. Even after 12 months few miners were starved back to work. The miners' strike was lost because the miners were starved of real political support from the working class movement. Labour's support groups contributed to the miners' physical survival, but they also contributed to their political isolation.

To collect funds from the public, Labour's campaign presented the miners as poor people deserving of charity, not as workers fighting to defeat the bosses. They retreated from all the hard arguments about picket-line violence, law and order and democracy, all the issues that could have played a vital role in strengthening workers' identification with the miners. Some groups even banned left-wing paper sales from their collections. The support groups appealed for middle class

sympathy not working class solidarity.

In reality, the left was not so much an alternative to the right as its auxiliary arm. The Labour Party's special claim to recognition before the British establishment is that it has some influence, through the unions, with the working class. Kinnock and Orme presented their services as mediators to the coal board on the strength of Labour's historic links with the NUM. These links were renewed and strengthened during the strike by Benn and Skinner and through the network of miners' support groups. It is significant that these groups did not come into operation until the second month of the strike when the Labour leaders began their attempts to negotiate a deal. Without these direct links with the rank and file, Labour's claim to be able to deliver the miners' support for any deal would have had no foundation.

The role of the Labour Party-dominated left during the miners' strike confirms that it can provide no alternative to the existing leadership. The fact that both right and left share a common commitment to the politics of Labourism ensures that the left can never fulfil its promise to transform the Labour Party.

At the end of the strike the left's various factions are left chasing illusory solutions. For some the only positive achievement of the strike was the success of the miners in some areas, notably South Wales, in winning the sympathy of the churches and other respectable community institutions. For them, the lesson of the strike is that the working class movement can only survive through dissolving itself into a morass of middle class pressure groups. This strategy looks beyond Kinnock towards the SDP/Liberal Alliance. For others, the lesson is that it is impossible for rank and file workers to organise independently. The only hope for activists, according to this defeatist view, is to retreat into the organisations of the labour movement. But these organisations are part of the problem, not part of the solution. The miners' strike has exposed the impotence of the old trade union structures in defending workers' basic interests. This strategy looks back to the old labour movement of the sixties and seventies. But we have to take the class struggle into the eighties.

Where do we go from here?

From now on the ruling class will turn every strike into a trial of political strength. Every dispute will be turned into a conflict of class power. We have no alternative but to respond on the wider political front to the capitalist offensive against the working class.

The miners' strike showed that ordinary trade unionism is no threat to the establishment. A strike conducted according to the timetable of negotiations at Acas, with solidarity action organised according to TUC guidelines, and a day of action on a Sunday to round it all off, will never worry the British bourgeoisie. As long as the working class plays by the rules of the industrial relations game the bosses are certain to come out on top. It was when the miners began to take things into their own hands that the establishment began to lose its nerve.

It was when miners started fighting back against police attempts to frustrate their picket lines that the bosses got worried. When they went off in groups to persuade

scabs to stay at home, the bosses got even more concerned. They unleashed the riot squads and dug up obscure laws to stop the militants. The press did its duty and launched a campaign of hysteria against the picketers. When mining communities in Yorkshire rose up in mass defiance of the police occupation in the summer of 1984, the establishment was thrown into a fresh panic. The bosses drafted squads of bishops into the area together with the riot police to try to restore order. As long as the union officials were in control of the strike the bosses were happy. When the initiative passed to the rank and file and the communities, the employers feared losing control over the whole situation.

One of the most positive features of the miners' strike was the way in which it actively involved women in the mining areas. This was another development which challenged the wider power of the capitalist system over the working class. The restriction of women's involvement in economic and political life through their family responsibilities divides and weakens the working class. Women's involvement in the strike in collective kitchens and in childcare arrangements and in all the rallies, meetings and demonstrations gave added strength to the miners' struggle. Just as the union bureaucracy frustrated rank and file initiative in the union, it restricted women's role in the strike as far as it could to the kitchens. Nevertheless, the women showed how going beyond the confines of trade unionism could cause greater problems to the employers.

These aspects of the miners' strike point the way forward. Winning strikes in the eighties means the working class preparing to take power over society. British capitalism offers no future and the old labour movement has only nostalgia for the

On the march: women made a breakthrough in the miners' strike

past. The deployment of the centralised power of the capitalist class dictates the need for a centralised political response from the working class. Defending class interests demands organisation, not merely against particular employers, but against the system as a whole. The experience of the miners' strike shows that a revolutionary movement is the essential precondition for the forward movement of the working class.

The Revolutionary Communist Party is a party that has no allegiances to the British establishment or to the old labour movement. In its active intervention in the miners' strike the RCP constantly raised the political stakes and pointed the way forward for the strike. By continually striving to maximise the anti-capitalist potential of the dispute the RCP showed how to take forward not only the miners but the whole working class movement. Politicising the struggles of the working class today is the way to prepare to take power out of the hands of the capitalist class for good.

What about the miners? It is certain that the end of the miners' strike will be followed by more pit closures, more victimisations, and more attacks on the wages and conditions of the miners. The return to work cannot be a return to the same old ways. It must be a return which builds on all the experiences and all the links among activists that have been formed during the strike. Resistance to these attacks cannot be left to individual pits or individual militants. It requires a national lead. If the current NUM leadership is not prepared to give this lead it should make way for those who are.

The first line of the battle must be the campaign for an amnesty for *all* the miners victimised in the strike. A fund to pay their pensions is not enough — they need their jobs back and the union must fight to ensure they get them. The next issue is resistance to pit closures. Closures can only be fought at a national level and it is essential that resistance is continued against all redundancies. Militants must make sure that information is shared and that miners and other workers are kept informed of new developments. The wage rise that has now been deferred for two years is another outstanding issue. This may be coupled with the employers' attempts to impose new working conditions and even longer shift times. The old slogan 'Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day' sums up the only stand consistent with defending miners' living standards.

The defeat of the miners' strike confirms that miners need to transform their union into one that can measure up to their needs. They need a union that stimulates rank and file initiative instead of frustrating it. They need a union that breaks down the barriers between miners in different areas, between men and women in the mining areas and between miners and other workers. The miners can never again afford to make the mistake of allowing their struggles to be fought out according to a dusty rule book, antiquated bureaucratic procedures and secret negotiations with the bosses. The conduct of the union must be removed from the plane of the bureaucracy and put in the hands of the rank and file. The miners have lost one battle, but they have learned how to fight. This can only strike fear in the bosses. We are confident that if the miners and other workers draw the political lessons from their experiences and regroup their forces they will have their revenge.

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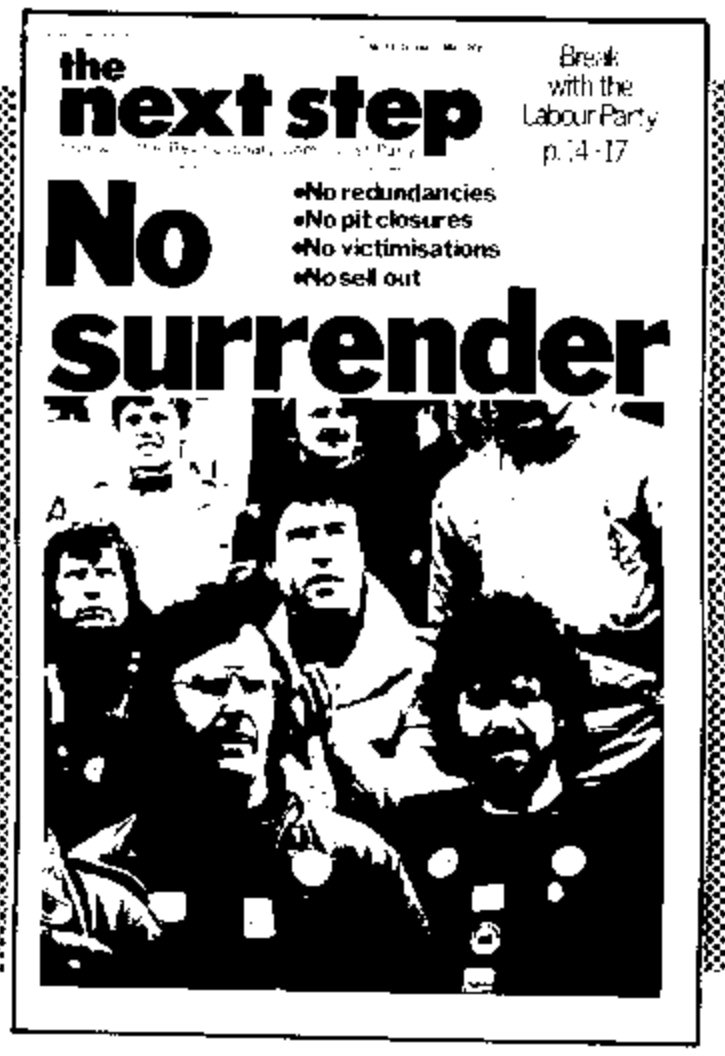

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Mike Freeman is the editor of **the next step.**

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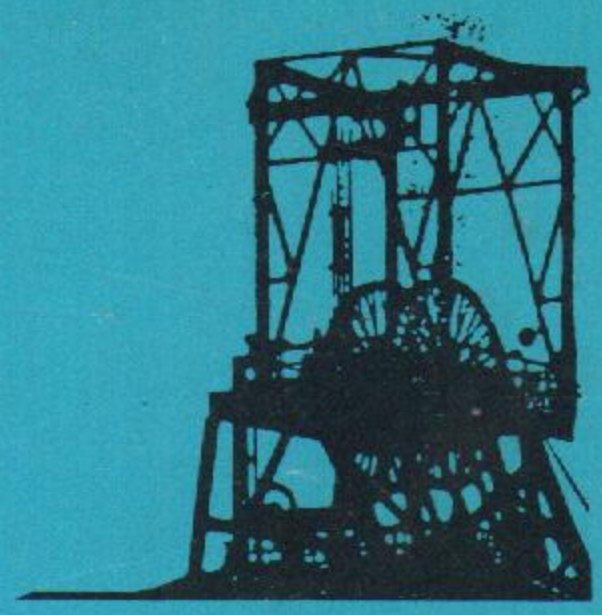
The miners' fight for jobs

OUR DAY WILL COME



The miners' strike was the most important event in British politics since the 1926 General Strike. The miners' fierce struggle against the National Coal Board and the Tory government has inspired millions of workers and shown that it is possible to fight back against the system.

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