

the miners' next step

Revolutionary Communist Party strike special 10p

Unity must be won

After four weeks the miners' strike has reached a critical stage. Direct action has spread the strike through most of the coalfields. Yet a significant number of pits, especially in Nottinghamshire and the Midlands, remain open. To make the strike united and effective – and to win broader sympathetic action – we need to carry the mass of miners for an all-out national stoppage.

We need to pull the miners together in every coalfield in the country. We need to channel their anger against the National Coal Board and the Government. To win mass support for all-out action we need

● a national focus

At present the strike is being conducted coalfield by coalfield, area by area. The result is that the action is badly co-ordinated and patchy in its effects. Often miners in one pit don't know what's going on at other pits nearby, never mind in other areas. A campaign for a centrally organised strike would mobilise the miners into a nation-wide fighting force and make the strike really bite.

A national campaign would provide a focus for discussion and action at pit and area level. Mass meetings are vital to make all miners aware of the latest developments in the strike and to in-

volve as many as possible in picketing and other activity. A country-wide campaign could coordinate delegations of rank and file activists travelling through the coal-

fields to win the arguments for all-out action against the pit closures. The proposed miners' march for jobs from Kent through London to the moderate Midlands areas is the sort of initiative that could be followed and linked up with other areas' activities.

● national leadership

To overcome regional divisions and move the strike forward leadership at national level is essential. As long as the strike is controlled at area level, militants in different areas will remain isolated. They will not be able to link up and extend the action against MacGregor and the Tories. Winning the strike depends on rank and file activists in the miners' union persuading the more passive workers in every area to respond to a national strike call, whatever the attitude of particular area leaders. It also depends on activists getting together with militants in other unions



Carrying the arguments: a campaign for a national strike is vital to unite the miners

and organising to bring the nation's energy supplies to a halt.

The NUM area leaders prefer to run the strike through behind the scenes talks with other union leaders. But, as we have seen, agreements between union officials in distant offices cannot stop the movement and use of coal supplies. Cooperation between rank and file miners and the railway workers, lorry drivers and power workers who do the work on the ground is the only guarantee of success.

● national organisation

The paramilitary police occupation of the coalfields in recent weeks shows the

extraordinary measures the Coal Board and the Government are prepared to adopt to win their battle against the miners. The extraordinary character of the bosses' offensive demands an extraordinary response. We need a combined national campaign of striking, picketing and sympathetic action to force the Coal Board to back down over pit closures and mass redundancies. To be effective this campaign must be organised at national level – and it must have the miners' full backing.

Given the divisions that exist in the miners' ranks, the only way to win the backing of the mass of miners is by winning a majority for all-out action in a national ballot. We need to

stay out on strike and to step up the picketing. We also need to use a campaign for a vote for a clear majority in favour of a national strike as a means of restoring and strengthening miners' unity.

There is a growing danger that the militant areas – Yorkshire, Kent, Scotland, South Wales – will become isolated. Even within the militant areas there is a risk that a minority of activists will become cut off from the rest of the workers on strike. A campaign for all-out action would provide a focus to unite the mass of miners behind the activists. When the miners are united and fighting together – who then will be able to stop them?

Taking control

NATIONAL RANK AND FILE MEETING ON
THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE MINERS STRIKE

Saturday 14 April 2pm

Marcus Garvey Centre

Lenton Boulevard

Nottingham

creche plus food

It's them against us

When National Coal Board chairman Ian MacGregor announced 20 pit closures and 20 000 redundancies on 6 March he triggered off the biggest explosion of militancy in the coalfields for a decade.

The miners' strike exposes a basic conflict in our society. The employers and the Government, the courts and the police have united to try to crush the miners' attempts to defend their jobs and livelihoods. The imposition of virtual martial law in the coalfields shows that the

bosses recognise that they are fighting to assert their power as a class. MacGregor and Thatcher have made it clear that it is a matter of them against us.

Where does that leave us? Up to now our movement has lacked the unity and clarity of our class enemies. We have allowed regional divisions to weaken our ranks. And while the Tories have solidly backed the Coal Board, the Labour Party and the TUC have yet to stand up for the miners.

Our movement is undermined by a political flaw. Miners have assumed responsibility not only for defending their own livelihoods, but also for protecting and strengthening the British coal industry. The identification of the interests of miners with the fate of their industry has paralysed miners' resistance to a long series of productivity deals, pit closures and manpower reductions. All these have been justified by the Coal Board's concern to make

British mining competitive.

The miners' commitment to the coal industry leads to difficulties for militants trying to unite miners in support of strike action. Preventing pit closures will certainly make the Coal Board's problems of competitiveness and profitability even worse. Only a commitment to fight for the interests of British miners regardless of the consequences for the British mining industry can unite the miners against the Coal Board and the Government.

The British coal industry versus British miners

THEIR PROBLEM: making coal mining in Britain profitable

The recession has brought a decline in the demand for coal from British industry, growing competition from low-priced foreign coal, and increasing pressure to curb government expenditure on coal mining. The result is stockpiles of unsold coal and mounting financial losses.

The NCB's response to the crisis of the coal industry is to attempt to create and sustain a high-volume, low-cost industry:

'It does not take a ruthless capitalist to

work out what Mr MacGregor and the Coal Board should be doing. The 1974 Plan for Coal, the shocking Monopoly Commission report, the House of Lords select committee on European Community coal policy, successive Commons select committees, ministers and Coal Board managers have all concluded that the Board should invest in new low cost pits and close old uneconomic ones.' (*The Times*, 13 March)

Nevertheless the Government appointed a ruthless capitalist in MacGregor. Last September he embarked on a programme of closures and redundancies, austerity and discipline to improve the market performance of British coal mining.

OUR PROBLEM: preserving miners' livelihoods

The recession has brought mass unemployment and stagnating living standards. Since 1979 around 50 000 miners' jobs have disappeared and 50 pits have been closed down, while the total number on the dole has swelled from just over one million to more than three million. Unemployment in many mining areas is now around 20 per cent. Miners' wages have fallen steadily behind — they have received no increase at all since November 1982. Productivity has increased by nine

per cent over the past five years, bringing harder work in worse conditions. Wilf Moore, a miner at Hatfield Main, Doncaster, summed up the grim situation facing miners in Yorkshire:

'If our pit shuts there's nothing round here. There used to be the steel industry but MacGregor's seen to that. Most people here, the whole community, depends on the pit. You grow up expecting to go down the pit when you leave school. Most miners know nothing else but mining. That's why for us it's a fight to the end against pit closures.'

Miners have been forced to fight to maintain jobs and living standards.

THEIR SOLUTION: all-out attack on miners' jobs, living standards and working conditions

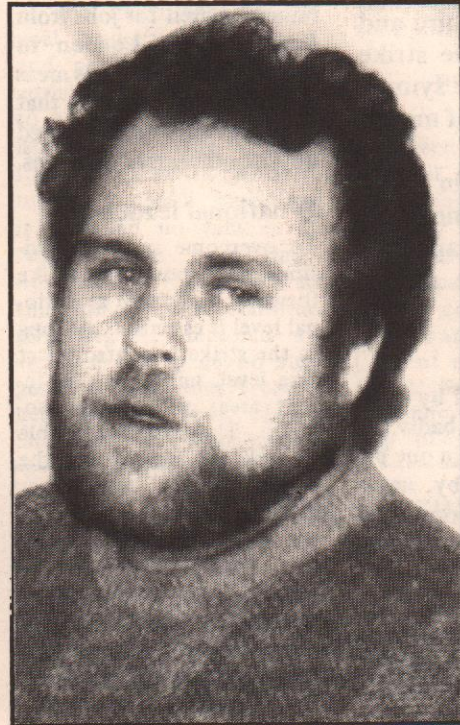
To make the British coal industry a going capitalist concern requires

- the concentration of production in a small number of efficient modern pits and the closure of the rest, with large scale redundancies; MacGregor has not denied Arthur Scargill's claim that his ultimate target is to reduce the number of pits from 170 to 100 and the number of miners from 184 000 to 100 000
- the reduction of labour costs by holding down wages in the industry; last year's 5.2 per cent pay offer means a continuing decline in real income
- an increase in productivity by establishing precise area and pit financial and output targets and tightening up managerial control.

'The sooner it is done, the quicker we shall balance output and demand and bring about stability.' Ian MacGregor, announcing his latest package of cuts and closures to the miners



The boss: ruthless attack



The miner: fighting to survive

OUR SOLUTION: an all-out national fightback in defence of jobs and conditions

To save miners' livelihoods requires

- fighting all redundancies and pit closures; in the event of pit exhaustion all jobs must be transferred
- maintaining and increasing wages; miners cannot afford to let their hard won earnings decline again
- defending existing working conditions against attempts to make labour even more intensive; in 1982 more than 800 miners suffered serious injuries and 38 lost their lives in Britain's pits — we cannot let them sacrifice our safety for their profits

'If the Coal Board and the Government get away with this attack on the miners we'll all be back in our bare feet, like after 1926.' Branch committee member Alan Bailey, Armthorpe, Yorkshire

THEIR METHODS: whatever measures necessary to break miners' resistance

The employers have mobilised the full resources of the state to try to smash the miners' resistance. With the full backing of the Government, the Coal Board used

- the courts; the judges granted an immediate injunction to the Coal Board to block the Yorkshire miners' flying pickets and to threaten union funds; they immediately rejected the Kent miners' appeal against being prevented by police from leaving the county to picket 200 miles away
- the police; once the strike gathered momentum the police put Scotland Yard's National Recording Centre on full 24-hour alert and drafted up to 20 000 riot-trained

officers into the coalfields; they set up road blocks, intimidated pickets with vastly superior numbers and arrested hundreds of miners; they also launched a massive intelligence operation, tapping phones, interrogating prisoners and building up their computer files on rank and file activists

- the press; the mass media is always at the disposal of the employers in an industrial dispute and the miners' strike has proved no exception; the gutter press has worked day and night to publicise the views and actions of any miners who oppose the strike, to play up divisions among the miners and to try to discredit the strike in the eyes of the public:

'I believe the overwhelming majority of the people in this country are behind the police in the excellent work they are doing.' Margaret Thatcher, in the House of Commons, 30 March

OUR METHODS: whatever methods are necessary to prevent pit closures and save jobs

While the employers can call on the immense powers of the Tory Government and the state machine, the miners are thrown back on the resources of the working class. Yet our resources are enormous if we can mobilise them

- to make the strike bite: by bringing all coal mining to a halt, all coal movements to a standstill and cutting off all energy supplies to British industry; the actual involvement of the mass of miners, women in the mining communities and ordinary workers in fighting the Coal Board and the Government is vital to success
- to defy the courts and the police: by asserting our right to fight for our

class against the forces of the state — which stops at nothing to protect the Coal Board's right to destroy miners' jobs and miners' communities

- to publicise the miners' case: the miners need propaganda that can educate, agitate and organise their own resistance and the solidarity of other workers; the central theme must be the necessity for the miners and the labour movement to take whatever action is necessary to save miners' livelihoods, regardless of state restrictions or the consequences for the Coal Board's account books:

'I believe that if we can take our case about our fight for jobs and a decent living to the miners in the moderate areas and to the wider working class movement, we can beat MacGregor and this Tory government'. Yorkshire miner Maurice Vanstone, at a Revolutionary Communist Party public meeting, 30 March

Whose strike is it anyway?

Only rank and file initiative and control at pit, area and national level can make the miners' strike united and effective.

'NOW WE'RE OUT, we're not going back until we've forced MacGregor to drop this closure programme', declared a Kent miner on picket duty in the Midlands. His attitude summed up the determination of thousands of rank and file miners.

The problem facing militant miners as they travel around the country is how to draw the mass of miners — and other workers — into action alongside them. To achieve the unity and coherence the miners' strike desperately needs, a radical change in the approach of the miners' union is required.

Accountability

Open meetings, full discussion and democratic decision making are essential to ensure the maximum involvement of the largest possible number of workers in running any strike. Regular mass meetings are also a vital way of making sure that union officials carry out the wishes of their members. Mass meetings ensure that the rank and file is fully aware of the issues and can make informed decisions about different courses of action. They also guarantee the accountability of the leadership to the rank and file.

The leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers however prefers to work behind the scenes, through official union channels. The NUM leaders entered the current dispute, not by campaigning for an all-out strike at mass meetings around the coalfields, but by endorsing action in the militant areas in the hope that it would spread. This course of action may be in accord with the union constitution, but it has had the effect of fragmenting the miners' forces and isolating the militant areas.

In a battle in which success depends on winning active support of rank and file workers, behind the scenes manoeuvres are simply ineffective. The miners' leaders cannot unite the miners by agreement among the militant area leaders behind closed doors. Even if the Nottinghamshire leaders agree to call their members out, this is no guarantee that the miners will respond. Nor can this approach win wider sympathy action. The leaders of the railway unions agreed with the NUM leaders that the movement of coal by rail would be stopped. But because nobody had persuaded the majority of ordinary railway workers to take this course of action many coal wagons are still moving.

Much of the behind the scenes work carried out by the miners' leaders leads them further away from the rank and file into cooperation with the employers. The recent meeting of the top level standing committee between the NUM and the Coal Board, at which MacGregor announced his latest closure package, concluded with agreement between both sides to continue joint collaboration on a whole series of projects. Despite the strike the NUM has not withdrawn from the network of committees on which it meets management day in, day out. The net result of the NUM leaders' bureaucratic style of leadership and close relationship with the Coal Board is that they tend to become more accountable to the employers than they are to their own rank and file.

War not peace

The success of the miners' strike depends on bringing the British economy to a standstill. The miners' flying pickets express the militant miners' clear grasp of the seriousness of the situation. Miners urgently need to make the strike solid in the coalfields and then move outwards to the power stations. The Coal Board and its big customers have their stockpiles and their fat bank accounts. Time is on their side. Ordinary miners have been on basic wages for five months,

they get no strike pay and have scant reserves. That's why miners need to strike hard and strike fast to repulse the employers' offensive.

Rather than face up to MacGregor's onslaught and go all-out for victory, the NUM leadership has tried to avoid the inevitable showdown with the Coal Board. While the Coal Board took advantage of the overtime ban to build up stocks and prepare for battle, the NUM made no urgent preparations for the coming conflict. Since the strike began the national leadership has provided no clear strategy or direction. It has simply followed behind the militant areas, holding back rather than pushing forward. While right wingers on the national executive have pulled out all the stops to prevent a national strike, the national leadership has made no serious attempt to heal the divisions in the union and unite the membership behind the strike.

The NUM leadership prefers to play safe with limited industrial action rather than risk a call for an all-out national strike. This is because it is more concerned to press the Coal Board to change its wider policies for the industry and to modify its aggressive attitude towards the union than it is to force a stop to closures and redundancies. After all, the union leaders have accepted both in large numbers for many years. Before the strike began Arthur Scargill threatened industrial action 'to make MacGregor see reason' and to make him 'return to the negotiating table'. But MacGregor's harsh capitalist logic sees no reason beyond the necessity for closures and redundancies to make British coal mining profitable. He has made it clear that he no longer wants to talk. He wants action now, to shake out jobs and crush the NUM into submission to his dictates.

The miners face two choices. They can follow their leaders' strategy and delay, allow the divisions to deepen and the militants to become isolated. Or they can take over the running of the dispute and go all-out to win.

A campaigning vote

MacGregor, the media and the right wingers on the NUM executive want a national ballot because they think they can win. Their confidence has grown as the divisions in the NUM have deepened and the

national leadership has allowed them to make all the running. But they misjudge the determination of the miners to fight for their livelihoods. They underestimate the miners' anger at the smears of the gutter press, the shabby manoeuvres of the right-wing area leaders and the wave of police terror in the coalfields.

The Revolutionary Communist Party is in favour of a national ballot because it can become a focus for stepping up the strike action. Campaigning for support for an all-out national stoppage can go hand in hand with extending picketing and sympathetic action. A campaign around a national ballot is the only way to ensure rank and file control over the dispute.

There is a long established tradition of holding national ballots in the NUM. The only way to make a national strike legitimate in the eyes of the mass of miners — and the rest of the working class — is by winning a majority for all-out action in a ballot. Until we have won a clear majority for the strike then miners who are reluctant to come out will have a perfect excuse. They will say — 'why should I go on strike when we haven't had a ballot'. And officials and members of other unions who are not wholeheartedly behind the miners have an easy cop out when asked to take sympathetic action. They are already saying 'if you can't get yourselves together behind a national strike, why should we support you?'.

The national leadership of the NUM is opposed to calling a national ballot. It fears that it will not be able to deliver the support of the majority of miners for a national strike. The union leaders present their reluctance to refer the conduct of the strike to the judgement of the membership as a lack of confidence in the militancy of the rank and file. In fact the NUM leaders' fear of putting their strategy to the vote exposes their lack of confidence in their own strategy.

A problem of strategy

Indeed the NUM's strategy cannot unite the miners. The miners' leaders constantly present the interests of British coal miners and the British coal industry as though they were one and the same. Yet the entire dispute (see opposite) arises out of a basic conflict of interests between the miners and the coal industry. The miners need their jobs to survive; the coal industry needs to shed jobs

in order to remain viable.

When the NUM leaders present the strike as 'the miners' battle for Britain' they expose the weakness of their case. Instead of uniting miners to defend jobs at any price, the NUM urges miners to shoulder the burdens of the Coal Board. But the Coal Board's problems can only be solved in the midst of a recession through a programme of pit closures and redundancies that sets miner against miner in every pit and every area.

The NUM leadership tries to justify industrial action as a means of putting pressure on the Coal Board and the Government to change their policies for the industry. But many miners, especially in areas such as Nottinghamshire where most pits are not immediately under threat, cannot see the point in strike action which they believe may jeopardise the economic security of their pits. And militant leaders who proclaim their commitment to the British coal industry cannot convince such miners why they should join a national strike which can only damage the industry. Hence their fear of a national ballot.

The only strategy that can persuade miners in every area to join a national stoppage is one that rejects any concern for the problems of the industry. If we put the interests of miners to the fore then there is a solid basis for unity. Miners in both Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire need jobs and decent wages and conditions whatever the prospects for the coalfields. Food, housing, clothing and everything else costs about the same in Mansfield as in Barnsley, whether the local pits make a profit or a loss.

All out for victory

Whatever the outcome of a ballot, the risk of consulting the miners is much less than the risk of ignoring them. If we don't go all-out for a vote for a national strike then the pressures of financial hardship, fear of the dole queues, state repression and media prejudice will inevitably bear down heavily on the miners and leave the militants isolated. But if we combine campaigning for mass support with seizing control of the whole direction of the strike then we can win a majority and win the strike. As a Yorkshire miner put it, 'This is our strike, and if we can move forward together we can beat MacGregor and Thatcher'.

Mike Freeman



Lobbying the council: Labour authorities must provide funds and facilities and make services available to the miners

Bob Radcliffe (reflex)

the miners' next step

Revolutionary Communist Party strike special

'The old policy of identity of interest between employers and ourselves (should) be abolished, and a policy of open hostility installed.'
(The miners' next step, unofficial reform committee, South Wales Miners Federation, 1912)

Supporting the miners

Since the miners' strike began Revolutionary Communist Party supporters have been actively mobilising solidarity with the miners. In South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire, where the next step has been sold regularly over the past couple of years, we have been closely involved in the strike itself. We have joined the picket lines, helped to make sure the miners get the benefits they are entitled to, helped to rally local women behind the strike and generally

discussed the direction of the dispute in the mining communities.

Around the country RCP branches have organised public meetings on the miners' strike, arranged for delegations of miners to visit local workplaces and conducted collections of money and food. Our aim has been to win the widest and most active working class support for the miners in their confrontation with the Coal Board and the Government.

Mobilising the women Building solidarity

WHEN THE MEDIA tried to stir up an anti-strike protest by a few miners' wives in Nottinghamshire they made sure that thousands of women in mining communities would rally behind the strike. Yet the sexist attitudes many miners have displayed on picket lines are a barrier to the active participation of women in the strike. Overcoming these barriers is vital to unite the working class movement in the battle against the Coal Board.

Women's action committees at Edlington and at Hatfield in Yorkshire, and at Staveley in Derbyshire have been actively supported by local RCP branches. Our supporters joined the protest march organised by women from Kent through Coalville in Leicester to challenge women's encouragement of strike breaking in the area. We participated in the picket by Yorkshire women of the Coal Board offices in Doncaster, where NUM clerical workers continued to work during the dispute.

Women's role in the strike cannot be simply that of wives providing tea and sympathy from the sidelines. We have argued for ● women's involvement in the committees where the decisions about the course of the strike are taken. Women need to be drawn into mass meetings and collective decisions just as much as rank and file miners. At present women tend to come under greater pressure in greater isolation than the men. But once they are involved, and the leaders of the strike become accountable to them, then they will be eager to join in the action

● the efficient organisation



All out for victory: Kent miners' wives hit the Midlands

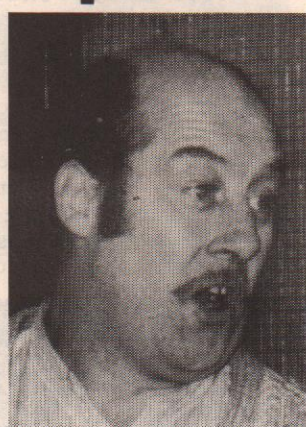
of benefits. Financial hardship is a serious problem for miners' families and it bears down most heavily on women. We need to squeeze as much as we can from the state for every miner's family and make sure that the collection and distribution of funds is properly organised

● all day nurseries. If women are to play an active part in the dispute it is more important than ever that the burden of childcare is relieved. Labour councils in the mining areas can play a useful role in providing full nursery facilities.

Our contribution has been welcomed by women in the mining areas – even if not always by the union bureaucrats. When officials in the Staveley women's support group tried to order RCP activists 'back to Yorkshire' because we were influencing 'gullible women', the majority voted that we should stay. Union officials have long proclaimed that 'a woman's place is in her union'. Now is a good time

for the NUM to show that it can fight for the whole of the mining community.

Miner speaks



Yorkshire miner Maurice Vanstone appealing for solidarity with the miners at an RCP public meeting in London. We have also held meetings in Sheffield, Bradford and Coventry as well as at Brimington in Derbyshire and Dunscoft in Yorkshire.

SUPPORTING THE MINERS

After four weeks on strike many miners and their families are already suffering real hardship. Miners get no strike pay, but still have £15 a week deducted by the social security. The miners are relying on the solidarity of the labour movement. Supporters of the RCP have been collecting money and food as a crucial practical expression of support for the strike. By the end of March the following funds had been passed on to miners in Yorkshire and Derbyshire:

Hatfield Main Colliery: £344.82
Hatfield womens' support group: £102.71
Armthorpe Colliery: £132.08
Edlington womens' support group: £25.00
Staveley miners' welfare: £170.00

Contributions for the miners can be given to sellers of the next step or sent to us by post and they will be passed on to rank and file miners' organisations.

Sheffield

On 4 April, 30 miners joined RCP supporters for a lobby of the city's Labour council, whose population includes 2000 miners, calling for:

- a freeze on miners' rent and rates payments
 - transport for miners' pickets
 - funds, facilities and nurseries
 - no restrictions on collecting money
 - a halt to the council's grant to the police while martial law conditions for Yorkshire miners persist.
- The council's response was to express 'deep concern' for the miners but provide no practical assistance. The council declared that it would inform local people of the importance of the coal industry to the local and national economy. It advised council committees to provide 'appropriate assistance' but made no specific commitments. While it upheld peaceful picketing, it provided no vehicles to replace the cars impounded by the police so that miners could continue picketing. It deplored all violence but made no suggestions how miners could get through road blocks and talk to other miners

through the massed ranks of police. On the same day the council turned down an application for a licence to collect funds in Sheffield on behalf of the striking miners

During the first week of April Yorkshire miners toured hospitals and bus depots in the Sheffield area, arguing for support for the strike and collecting money

Manchester

On 4 April RCP local election candidate Dave Halsworth took Yorkshire miners on a series of visits around local engineering factories

Student supporters of the RCP at the Polytechnic supported a call to provide union facilities and transport for the strike

Birmingham

On 5 April the RCP organised a delegation of hospital workers to support miners on strike at Keresley pit near Coventry; nurses at Dudley Road hospital recalled the local miners had come out in support of their strike in 1982

Kent miners picketing in the Midlands took part in a public discussion of the way forward for the strike

Bradford

On 30 March miners joined an RCP organised protest against the visit of Tory Party chairman John Selwyn Gummer to the city to attend the annual dinner of the engineering employers' association; Gummer got his face slapped and two people were arrested

Scotland

On 24 March Scottish supporters of the RCP joined Fife miners on the march in Dunfermline

In Glasgow we organised street meetings and tours of the hospitals, factories and docks in support of the miners

Miners at Polmaise pit, threatened with closure, received £30 from the RCP for their strike fund

Wales

On 31 March Cardiff RCP supporters joined a demonstration in solidarity with the miners and organised collections on their behalf

London

Over the first weekend of April Yorkshire miners took part in street meetings and collections around London shopping centres

MORE MEETINGS FOR THE MINERS

BOLSOVER FIGHTING DIVISIONS YORKSHIRE MINERS SPEAK!

Bolsover colliery is in the North Derbyshire area of the Coal Board, but its miners are members of the Nottinghamshire NUM. It is a focal point of the divisions in the miners' ranks.

Saturday 7 April 1pm
Carr Vale Hotel
Bolsover

GLASGOW

Tuesday 10 April 7.30pm
Partick Burgh Hall
Burgh Hall Street, off Dunbarton Road
(Partick Underground)

SHEFFIELD

Thursday 12 April 7.30pm
Victoria Hall
Chapel Walk

the next step
monthly review of the Revolutionary Communist Party
£5 for 12 months – from the address below

the miners next step
Revolutionary Communist Party strike special
We would welcome comments and criticisms from miners and others on the RCP's strategy for the miners' strike.

Please write to The Editor, the next step, BCM JP LTD, London WC1N 3XX
p&p Junius Publications Ltd April 1984