League for the Fifth International
Fighting for the formation of a new world party of socialist revolution
Published on **League for the Fifth International** (https://fifthinternational.org)

Home > Analysis by Country > Europe > Britain > Printer-friendly PDF

The Great Miners? Strike, 1984-85

Fri, 30/04/2004 - 22:00

Two decades have passed since the British miners launched a strike to defend their pits from a huge closure programme. The strike turned into one of the most decisive economic and political struggles of the twentieth century. Mark Hoskisson looks back at this contest between the British state and the thousands of working class men and women, whom the Tory prime minister of the time, Margaret Thatcher, famously described as ?the enemy within?.

The miners? strike of 1984-85 came to be called the ?Great Strike?. With good reason. It was the largest, longest trade union struggle in Britain, and the most far reaching in its consequences, since the 1926 General Strike. For a whole year, some 170,000 miners, plus the women of the mining communities, battled against everything the Tory government and the police threw at them.

The press witch hunted them as violent and anti-democratic thugs. The Tories tried to starve them back to work by cutting off all forms of state benefits. The police attacked their picket lines in paramilitary fashion. They occupied their villages like an invading army. The judges stole the union?s funds, ?exiled? militants from their own homes and imprisoned striking miners en masse. The secret services spied on them, infiltrated the movement, tapped their phones, as the ex-head of M15, Stella Rimington, then in charge of the spying operation on the miners, has revealed in her memoirs. Thatcher famously called them ?the enemy within?. It was civil war, class war on a grand scale.

In the twelve months of the strike 11,312 miners were arrested, over 200 imprisoned and 966 sacked because of their role in the strike. Over 3,000 were injured and two killed on the picket line ? David Jones and Joe Green. The entire strikebreaking operation cost the government more than ?3 billion. The Tories? bloody adventure in the Falklands/Malvinas war against Argentina, two years earlier, cost them less.

The striking miners, their wives and families met these attacks with courage, humour and an unbreakable will to win.

They showed fantastic creativity and imagination in all aspects of the strike. On the home front, they organised survival for twelve months with no wages, no benefits. They organised flying pickets, fought pitched battles with a militarised police force, they addressed meetings of thousands of other trade unionists in the campaign to win solidarity for their action. They traveled the world, spreading their message and winning support. The women of the mining communities built a mass women?s movement, almost from scratch.

Inspired by the miners? struggle, hundreds of thousands of activists in the union and political labour movement, in the Black, Asian and other immigrant communities, in the women?s and Lesbian and Gay movements totally committed themselves to helping the miners to win. In the face of the disgraceful neglect and betrayal by the official labour movement, rank and file militants from all of these sectors built miners? support committees that organised accommodation for miners and joined them on the picket line, made street and workplace collections, organised benefits, and a host of demonstrations and meetings.

Despite all this, the miners went back to work defeated, but every single one of them could walk tall down the pit lanes in March 1985. Every striker had given this battle their all. They had no reason to feel shame. Those with reason to hang their heads were the TUC leaders like Norman Willis, and most national union leaders.

To win such a battle needed more than heroism. It needed strategy and tactics and these had to go beyond even militant trade unionism. For this was a class struggle and, therefore, a political struggle. The politics of the National Union of Mineworkers? (NUM) leadership, including its most militant and left wing member, the president, Arthur Scargill, were shaped by left reformism ? in either a Labourite of Stalinist form. These politics played a decisive role in the strike.

Of course, unlike many bureaucrats, Scargill was a real fighter. He never had any intention of selling out. That is why militants, wherever he went, adored him and greeted him with the song, ?Arthur Scargill walks on water?. But while Scargill?s commitment to the miners? struggle was unbreakable it was not enough.

His politics and his strategy for victory never transcended the twin limits of militant trade unionism and left reformism. Where, objectively, a revolutionary communist approach was required, Arthur Scargill deployed a policy based on manoeuvres within the left wing of the union bureaucracy and a syndicalist belief that militant picketing by the NUM could defeat the might of the state. In short, he deployed the tactics which gave the miners victory in two great battles in the 1970s and ignored the fact that things had changed both in the working class movement and in the preparation and leadership of the ruling class.

The terrible price Scargill paid for his initial sectionalism and his later willingness to abide by the rule of his fellow general secretaries, was to open the door, months later, to the outright traitors and cowards who stood at the head of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). They betrayed the miners and opened the door to a wave of attacks on the British working class. Instead of organising the whole class for victory they looked every which way they could for a means of calling the strike off. In the words of one of these swivel-chair generals of the labour movement, David Basnett of the GMB, ?You cannot allow a dispute like this to rumble on. It is disturbing our economy and it is disturbing our industrial relations.?

When the miners were finally forced back to work, without a settlement of the strike, the traitors heaved a sigh of relief. The vanguard of the British working class had been beaten and, therefore, the right argued, strikes were outdated. Unions needed to concentrate on servicing their individual members with credit card schemes and cheap holiday offers. They needed to strike single union deals with employers under which recognition was granted in exchange for a no-strike policy. ?New realism? needed to replace the old style militancy.

The miners? defeat represented a strategic setback for the whole class. In the years that followed, section after section of workers was defeated, including the strongest remaining sections of the movement like the printers (1986) and the dockers (1989). Union membership figures plummeted. There was widespread union de-recognition in whole industries, especially the print. The right wing triumphed in the Labour Party. The left was systematically purged under Kinnock, a process that culminated with the elevation of Tony Blair to the leadership of the Labour Party.

New realism is directly responsible for the utterly false, but unfortunately widespread, belief in the unions today that you must never have an all out strike. The idea that one and two day strikes are the furthest we can go and that industrial action should always stay within the framework of the anti-union laws was born out of the defeat of the miners.

Twenty years on, growing numbers of workers are beginning to question the policies of the right. Left wingers have started to win union elections. More and more workers now view Blair as a sinner, not a saint. It has taken such a long time to recover ground for the simple reason that the lies of the right looked brighter in the dark days that followed the defeat of the miners.

But there was an alternative. Had a revolutionary party existed, had it built real roots across the whole working class, had it secured influence in the unions, then victory would have been possible. Victory required a strategy based on the transformation of what everybody recognised was a struggle with class wide significance into an actual class wide assault on the forces of capitalism and its state. Tragically, no such party existed. And never, since the defeat of the 1926 general strike, had the absence of a revolutionary party of the working class been so decisive in the outcome of a major class battle.

Thatcher, trade unions and politics

There was nothing inevitable about the defeats of the 1980s: struggle decided. The struggle of working class men and women had the potential to stop Thatcher. Time and again, opportunities presented themselves ? and these opportunities were not just missed, they were either negligently or maliciously thrown away by those entrusted with leadership in the movement.

The outcome of every working class struggle depends on two key factors: the preparedness of the workers to fight and the political strategy of their leaders when the fight is on. In the 1980s, section after section of workers moved into the front rank of struggle. From the car workers at Longbridge in 1979, through the steelworkers, to the printers, to the dockers at every major port in the country in 1989, they risked their livelihoods, their homes, their family life, and their jobs to fight Thatcher.

If the outcome had depended on the courage and determination of rank and file workers alone, Thatcher would have been out of office by 1983 at the latest. But the second factor ? the leadership?s politics and strategy ? enabled her to survive every crisis. Most union leaders were opposed to Thatcher and did want to defend their unions against her attacks, but they did not believe it was their business to bring her down. This was strictly forbidden by the basic ground rules of democracy. Trade unions negotiated with the employers: sometimes they fought them in strikes. Of course, they knew governments acted politically against the unions. Then they could protest, withdraw co-operation, and even give a nod and a wink if the rank and file took direct action. But they knew that it was strictly forbidden to openly leap the barriers between the ?industrial? and the ?political? struggle.

This was not just a question of cowardice by individual leaders. It was the outlook of an entire caste, the trade union bureaucracy. Indeed, ?trade unionism?, as such, could not leap over this boundary without becoming something else, revolutionary working class politics, committed to abolishing the capitalist system ?by any means necessary?. And those who were already won to these politics had the absolute duty to say what means were necessary. Those who knew, but did not say so, were revolutionaries in name only.

The union bureaucrats were, by and large, fearful of the militancy of their own members. That militancy, if it went unchecked or, even worse, brought tangible results, could lead to a challenge to the privileged position of the union leaders. It could rob them of their function in life ? negotiating on behalf of workers within capitalism. It could bring down their entire political strategy ? piecemeal reform via a Labour government and peaceful co-existence with the capitalist system.

The political strategy of the trade union leaders who oversaw the great struggles of the 1980s was to view each one in isolation from the others, to carefully maintain each sectional division. From Bill Sirs at the head of the ISTC in the 1980 steel strike, through to Ron Todd of the TGWU during the dock strike of

1989, reformist leaders set strict limits beyond which the rank and file could not be allowed to go. Anti-union laws had to be obeyed to save union funds from the courts and union officials from the cells. Industrial action could not be used to defy and change the law, despite the evidence that this could be done and had been done in the 1970s. The struggle should not be allowed to become political, lest the union leaders get accused of subverting democracy. Above all else, nothing should be allowed to lead to a direct challenge to capitalism itself.

Scargillism

Arthur Scargill, like his political ally Tony Benn inside the Labour Party, seemed to offer a radical alternative to official reformism. The brand of militant left reformism that shaped the politics of both men was hugely influential amongst militants in the 1970s and 1980s. The ruling class demonised Scargill as a politically motivated wrecker in every newspaper. However, between his reputation and his actual politics there was a gap. Scargill was a very militant left reformist but not a revolutionary. For Scargill, militant trade union action was decisive in fighting capitalism because it could push Labour well to the left and install people like Benn in the top leadership of the party. A left-led Labour government, backed by militant unions, could bring about a socialist transformation through parliament.

This strategy meant that his style of leadership inside the NUM was very different from that of his predecessors or his fellow union leaders. He positively encouraged militancy. He boldly championed socialist ideas. He excoriated those who preached retreat in the face of the Tory onslaught. This made him a much better trade union leader, but it did not make him a communist and it did not amount to a strategy for victory in the great strike.

In the first place, his strategy left the NUM?s own bureaucratic structures in place. Its undemocratic rules, forged during periods of right wing ascendancy, were left untouched. Only when the strike was underway did he move to abolish one of the worst, the need for a 55 per cent majority in a national strike ballot. Equally, he left the strength of the regional bureaucracies intact. His strategy was the classic Stalinist Broad Left one: to capture the bureaucratic machine, not to dissolve it into rank and file democratic control which could hold the officials accountable, make them servants of the members. These weaknesses in his strategy revealed themselves in the early days of the strike, when right wing bureaucrats held out against taking action and the centre-left ones temporised, and again during the Battle of Orgreave, when even the left regions conspired to block pickets going to the coking plant.

A second key failing of Scargill?s politics was his refusal to break with and denounce the right wing traitors in the other unions and the TUC bureaucracy. He was wary of them for months but, when he finally turned to them, he did so by accepting their terms, their control. This was fatal in the fight to get workers to take action alongside the miners. It meant that militants could not use a call from Scargill and the miners as a means of mobilising their fellow workers. This problem became acute during the two dock strikes of the summer of 1984 and then again after the September TUC. Just as Benn had put the unity of Labour, which he thought was essential to win the next election, above the opportunity to the finish off the right wing back in 1982, when he concluded a truce on the eve of the general election, so Scargill put the unity of the union movement, which was, in fact, the unity of the bureaucratic caste at its head, above the need to destroy the power and influence of that caste as a means of securing victory in the miners? struggle.

Scargill?s politics also dictated that the political consequences of the battle he was leading be avoided at all costs. What were these? The need to split the Labour Party, ousting the right and rallying hundreds of thousands of the best militants to a totally revolutionised party, one based on uncompromising class struggle and a revolutionary programme. Just as the opportunity existed for the miners to defeat Thatcher so the opportunity existed to defeat Hattersley and Kinnock. Indeed, this was not an optional extra. If the

right in the unions and the Labour Party were not defeated and ousted, then it would be the left who would be ousted. In Lenin?s phrase it was merely a question of ?who would do it ? or to whom would it be done?? There was no third way.
Scargill eventually split from Labour, many years later, when the troops who could have formed a mass party had long gone. During the strike, to the militants who could see how rotten the Labour leadership was under ?Judas Kinnock? (as militants called him), Scargill repeated that the ?NUM was their party?. Behind this syndicalist phrase-mongering, he concealed an actual unity with Labour based on the illusion that the NUM party could one day transform the Labour Party. Always and everywhere, he excluded the idea of a new, revolutionary party.

The revolutionary communist starts from the reality of the class struggle and outlines a strategy capable of taking it forward to a struggle against the system itself. The two are directly connected by life; the job of the revolutionary agitator is to convince thousands to act on that connection. Where the bureaucrats preached sectionalism, we fought for active solidarity. Where the bureaucrats left each union leader free to do what they liked, we sought to organise the rank and file against those bureaucrats so that class interest prevailed over sectional interest. Where the bureaucrats preached obedience to the anti-union laws, we strove to rally the class to a general strike to smash them, a general strike that would pave the way to the victory of the miners and many other workers besides. Where the bureaucrats preached loyalty to a Labour Party that was siding with the police, we urged the building of a new working class party to fight the Labour traitors. And where the bureaucrats bemoaned picket line violence, we fought to organise the self-defence of those pickets so that their impact against both police and scabs could be maximised.

Above all, revolutionary policy meant that, when Scargill stayed silent about the backsliding of elements within his own union, and about the treachery of the TUC leaders, the revolutionaries had to tell the workers the truth.

To argue these things was not to ignore the daily round of small-scale tactical decisions that are posed by any strike. Such details are vital to victory, but they are not the deciding factor, especially when the ruling class had set out to win a strategic victory over the entire class by defeating its recognised vanguard. The deciding factor is politics, and the politics of revolutionary communism were the key to defeating the ruling class onslaught on the miners, an onslaught that they had been preparing for at least ten years.

The state prepares for class war

Thatcher?s war plan was predicated on two documents drawn up by two of her key allies. The first was a pamphlet by Keith Joseph called Solving the union problem is the key to Britain?s recovery, which set out the case for irreversibly shifting the balance of class forces away from ?the militants? and towards the bosses by ?changing the framework, the rules of the game?.

The new rules were introduced not as a single package (the mistake Heath had made) but as a series of legislative measures, normally introduced once every two years, which, in their totality, made effective trade unionism unlawful. Thatcher?s success in this regard was to give us the most draconian range of anti-union laws in the western world, laws that Blair has carefully preserved.

However, changing the legal framework could not be done without undermining the capacity of the union movement to resist those changes. Here, Thatcher drew on a document that became known as the Ridley Plan, named after one of her closest acolytes, Nicholas Ridley. Once again, learning from the mistakes of Heath, the idea behind Ridley?s plan was to ensure that the potential for generalised resistance to the Tory attacks was minimised. Workers would be taken on one section at a time. The issues would be apparently purely economic sectional ones and, in each case, the ground would be carefully prepared in advance.

This meant dividing the working class by temporarily buying some sections off, building up supplies to outlast strikes, and ensuring that the state machine was reorganised in order to carry through brutal repression where need be.

At the very heart of the Ridley Plan, was taking on and destroying the National Union of Mineworkers. Of course, the Tories? hatred of the NUM was fuelled by the humiliation the party had suffered at the hands of the union in both 1972 and 1974, but there was more to it than that.

Harold Macmillan, Tory leader in the early 1960s, once referred to the miners as the guards? regiment of the working class. That was how they were regarded by the entire labour movement, especially after their stunning victories of the 1970s. They were the vanguard, the section to which all others looked for a lead. Smashing the NUM would constitute a strategic victory over the entire working class. That was exactly Thatcher?s aim.

Ridley?s strategy was geared to mobilising all the resources necessary to achieve such a victory. From 1979 on, the Tories, at a ridiculous cost to the public purse and in total defiance of their stated economic policies, spent millions building up coal stocks as well as shifting more and more energy production to nuclear power stations. There would be no power cuts or three-day working weeks (as there had been under Heath) if the miners struck.

At the level of the state, the police were reorganised into a national strike breaking force, so that officers from different regions could be deployed, in military style operations, wherever there were mass pickets. To co-ordinate this operation, the National Reporting Centre, directly accountable to Thatcher and run by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) was established. In the context of a strike, Britain would, effectively, become a police state, without the government having to declare a state of emergency. At the same time, the weaponry available to the police was improved and increased.

In September 1983, Ian MacGregor, an American industrialist who had recently helped Michael Edwardes slash jobs, victimise militants and destroy union organisation in British Leyland, was appointed chair of British Coal. He was a close personal friend of Thatcher?s and has subsequently admitted that he was appointed by her to take on and defeat the NUM, to savage the industry and prepare it for privatisation. The only issue, he said, was when to do it. The launch of the fight was an ?exercise in timing?.

The last element of the Ridley Plan was to ensure that the miners would be isolated. This was achieved in two ways. First, by taking on and defeating other key sectors of the class. A series of defeats for the unions would, the Tories rightly reasoned, sap morale and undermine the potential for widespread solidarity action, especially if such action was now illegal under the anti-union laws. Car workers in 1979, steel workers in 1980, rail workers and civil servants in 1982 and the print unions in 1983, were all defeated. In each case, their strikes were left isolated by the leadership of the labour movement, which was shifting ever more to the right.

At the same time, the Tories started to cultivate sections of the union bureaucracy who were open to actual organised scabbing. In Frank Chapple of the electricians (and his successor Eric Hammond) and in Gavin Laird of the AUEW, they found just such allies. The Tories also began to look for allies in the NUM itself, in the ?moderate? areas, that is, those that had enjoyed huge pay rises thanks to productivity deals and who had voted against national strikes in three ballots prior to 1984. In Nottinghamshire, they found them.

Only when each of these components of the Ridley Plan was in place did Thatcher give the order for the opening shot of the war against the enemy within to be fired. Indeed, she showed she was not afraid to retreat until she was ready. In 1981, a series of pit closures was announced in South Wales and in Kent.

The announcements were met by rolling strikes in these areas that threatened to go national. Coal stocks were low. The police were not ready. The scabs hadn?t been organised. Thatcher ordered a tactical retreat and announced that she was intervening to keep the pits open!

By this time, Arthur Scargill, a left wing Yorkshire leader, had succeeded Joe Gormley, beating the right wing candidate hands down. Scargill had been personally responsible for organising the hugely effective flying pickets in the 1972 strike and was regarded by the entire ruling class as their public enemy number one. He made it clear that he expected there to be a fight to the death with Thatcher.

Unlike the Tories and their class, Scargill did not have the undivided backing of the labour movement. Indeed, the majority of the TUC General Council hated him. The Labour Party leaders regarded him as a dangerous liability. Nor did he himself have any equivalent of the Ridley Plan, no strategy for putting the entire labour movement on a war footing for the battle that was about to commence. Of course, he made sensible precautions to preserve union funds from the courts and launched a propaganda campaign to prepare miners for the fight that was coming and so on. But all his preparations were based on the idea that the miners, and the miners alone, could and would defeat Thatcher, bring her down and restore the glory days of 1974. The problem was, 1974 was a distant memory and, in between, many things, not least the fighting organisations in the workplaces, had changed dramatically.

So, in 1981, although Scargill could claim to have won round one, the contest had not really started as far as Thatcher was concerned. Only after her military victory over Argentina in the South Atlantic and her massive election victory in Britain in 1983, was she ready. The Ridley Plan could now be put into operation against the miners. In early 1984 The Economist magazine hinted at what was to come:

?For three years the government has been afraid of tackling its biggest industrial headache ? the coal mines. Now is the time.?

The fight for a national strike

On 1 March, 1984, the Coal Board announced the closure of Cortonwood Colliery in Yorkshire. Scargill had argued that MacGregor?s plan was to launch a huge pit closure programme ? beginning with 20 designated ?uneconomic pits?, but going on to close down 70, with around 70,000 job losses.

Within three days of the announcement of its closure Cortonwood was on strike. Within two days the whole of Yorkshire was out. Pickets were sent to other areas and most responded. Scotland, South Wales, Kent, the North East and North Derbyshire were soon on all out strike.

Throughout the Midlands, the action was patchy. In Nottinghamshire, the right wing began to hit back with calls for a national ballot if there were to be a national strike. The militants answered this wavering with more pickets.

The battle line had been drawn and it was crystal clear that the call for a national ballot coming from the right wing of the NUM executive was a way of avoiding a fight. The NUM had an old rule that stipulated that there had to be a 55 per cent majority in a ballot (as opposed to a simple majority) for a strike to take place. In two ballots, Scargill had won a majority just short of 55 per cent and as a result no strikes had taken place.

With a rolling strike underway, a return to work in order to have a ballot would have been a disaster. The momentum of the struggle would have been lost and pits would have been closed while the ballot was underway. The rolling strike, bringing out each area and then sanctioning the action and co-ordinating it nationally via the executive was, under the circumstances, the correct way to go forward.

Although anything else would have meant a return to work, on its own, this strategy, based on Rule 41 of the NUM rule book, was not enough to win the campaign for a national strike. A national strike needed a national decision and that could only be won by taking the fight to the right wing leaders in the Midlands. It meant using the weapon of workers? democracy against those leaders. But Scargill and his two closest allies in the NUM ? Peter Heathfield and Mick McGahey (a left Labour and a Communist Party member respectively) ? failed to utilise the weapon of workers? democracy in order to make the strike truly national.

Firstly, the NUM executive refused to call a national strike. Their motive was to avoid getting bogged down in a protracted ballot procedure but, while the motive was good, the decision was bad. What they did instead was to announce that it was up to the regions themselves whether or not to strike.

This effectively ?legalised? the right wing leaders? campaign, in the non-striking areas, against any strike action at all, unless sanctioned by a national ballot. It also meant that many Midlands miners believed, at first, that they were not scabbing, because their region had not called them out. This was the excuse they were able to shout at the mass pickets who were increasingly being herded behind impenetrable police lines. Of course, the most class conscious miners in these areas supported the strike, but they had no weapon beyond arguing that ?picket lines mean don?t cross? to win over their workmates.

It was a fatal mistake that allowed the lines of division inside the NUM itself to harden. Had the executive called a national strike from the outset, it would have deprived the right of this opportunity and ensured that the NUM loyalism which was still strong even in the ?moderate? areas, especially Nottinghamshire, could have led to more widespread action. The reason the executive held back from this stemmed from one of the most sacred tenets of the trade union bureaucracy, never interfere on someone else?s patch.

Normally this means not interfering in the affairs of another union by appealing to the members over the heads of the leaders of that union. This is the unforgivable sin. Inside the NUM, however, because it was a federation, this tenet also applied to the regional bureaucracies themselves. The NUM was born out of a series of regional unions. Indeed, it first came together as the Miners Federation of Great Britain. Those regional bureaucracies were entrenched, jealous of their own specific power base, and operated for much of the time as separate entities.

Scargill himself had played this regional power game. During the 1981 closure crisis, he held back from bringing Yorkshire out on strike alongside South Wales and Kent, despite Yorkshire having voted by an 86 per cent majority to strike, because, as yet, no closures had been announced in that region. This led to rancorous divisions between the regions that treacherous South Welsh NUM leaders were able to use towards the end of the Great Strike to engineer the return to work with no settlement.

This was the context in which the strike began. The NUM leaders nationally would not risk openly challenging the right wing regional leaders in the Midlands. So, men like Jack Jones in Leicester called on his members to cross picket lines, while Ray Chadburn in Nottinghamshire urged his men to vote no to a strike in a regional ballot. At this point, these men had ceased to be representatives of the NUM. No matter what their members had voted for locally, the union, nationally, was on strike. The overwhelming majority of NUM members were on strike. The line had been drawn and Jones and Chadburn , trailblazers for the scab union that followed, were betraying the union. They needed to be fought. Scargill should have said clearly that he stood with the men on strike in the Midlands, not with the leaders sabotaging the strike. But the bureaucratic regard for federalism inside the union meant that they were able to conduct their anti-strike campaign free from restraint, at least publicly.

This was a fatal mistake by the leadership of the strike. In the battle for a national strike, it meant that a whole month was lost. That month was critical because it allowed the right wing, with unprecedented media support, to whip up hysteria over the lack of ?democracy? and the necessity of a ballot.

In the early days of the strike, there were large numbers of miners in favour of action in Nottinghamshire as well as in some of the smaller ?moderate? areas, like Lancashire and Leicestershire. At Notts pits like Cresswell, 395 voted to strike, 488 against. At Ollerton, where the police had staged a massive show of strength against the pickets, 335 voted for action, 681 against. These figures show that there was a big enough minority in the ?moderate? areas to guarantee that the call for a national strike could be won in every pit.

The key was to link up with the striking minority in those areas and get representatives of the striking miners to address pithead meetings at every colliery. It was critical to create an alternative, democratic means for deciding on the strike, where the opponents and waverers could be confronted and convinced. This was particularly important through March and April when the entire strike was dominated by the question of the ballot. The press were running a virulent pro-scab campaign throughout this period and access to pits that were still working was becoming increasingly difficult because of the police operation against pickets.

Nottinghamshire, in particular, was becoming a no-go area for pickets as the National Reporting Centre deployed road blocks, roving picket busting squads and massed ranks of police at working collieries to batter any pickets that did get through, resulting in the tragic death of a young striker, David Jones, early in the dispute. In one incident, cars carrying Kent miners bound for Nottinghamshire were stopped and turned back at the Dartford Tunnel near London. In all, some 10,000 police were used as scab protectors and a total of 167,000 people were turned away from the county at road blocks. The Attorney General ruled that such limits on freedom of movement were perfectly legal.

Of course, all of this should have been met by organised picket defence and, in part, it was, but to break the strikebreakers more than this was needed. The militants needed to get to the pitheads to call mass meetings. As Workers Power argued at the time:

?The NEC must organise for pithead meetings to be held in every colliery in every coalfield. They must hear speakers from the areas that are immediately under MacGregor?s axe. They should hear from workers taking action in support of the miners. All NEC members, and the National President in particular, should address mass rallies ? most vitally in the Midlands ? to urge maximum support for the NEC?s call [for a national strike] ... At pithead meetings a show of hands should precede the constitutionally prescribed ballot. These should be organised in the shortest possible time. Days not weeks.? (5 April 1984).

The NUM leadership did not follow this course. Instead, the leadership convened a national delegate conference on 19 April which finally declared the strike national and ordered the Notts miners and others to stop work. This was far less effective than the pithead mass meeting strategy we proposed. But, once the conference made its decision, it was necessary to enforce it.

At this stage, it was necessary to show to the then large minority of NUM members in the Midlands areas who did abide by the conference decision that the union, including the officials in the ?moderate? areas, was deadly serious. Every member who scabbed was now in breach of union policy and should have been disciplined. At this point, the hard scabs were still disorganised and loyalty to the NUM was still very strong.

Once again, however, the NUM leadership preferred a half-measure. They agreed to a new rule giving them the option to discipline the scabs, but they did not enforce it. This gave the hard right scabs the chance to organise which immediate expulsion would have denied them. They were now backed by key ruling class figures, like David Hart, who poured money in to help them organise. Together with a man called Chris Butcher, now thankfully a broken man, then a scab herder who called himself Silver Birch, he financed the setting up of the Nottingham Working Miners Committee. Appropriately conceived in Hart?s Claridges hotel suite, it met with warm approval from Thatcher and she gave it a guaranteed future, with financial backing (via businessmen) and the promise of sole negotiating rights in the areas it controlled. It went on to become a fully-fledged breakaway union, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM), an organisation founded for the sole purpose of scabbing.

Over the course of the next months, the Tories were not only able to use the huge coal stocks they had built up to keep the country free of power cuts but were also able to rely on scabs to keep the coal coming, and they had now engineered a split in the union itself. A mounting irony now attended the miners? chant, ?the miners united will never be defeated.?

The only way now was to shut down British industry by winning the solidarity of workers in power generation, transport and heavy industry. The Tories had the coal but, if they could not move it, or use it, what good would it do them? If the miners succeeded in the battle for solidarity action, then, despite the scabs, victory was still possible. Thus, a second phase of the Great Strike began.

The battle to close down industry

Anyone who looked at the situation in Britain in 1984 should have been able to see that it would not be possible simply to repeat the tactics which brought the miners their famous victories in 1972 and 1974. Much had happened in the intervening ten years. In 1982, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) ordered the rail drivers? union, ASLEF, to suspend its industrial action, accept a rotten sell out hatched between the TUC?s then leader, Len Murray, and British Rail or else face being cast out of the TUC.

In 1983, the print union, the NGA, went into dispute at the Stockport Messenger, a small printing plant run by a pioneer Thatcherite union-busting employer, Eddy Shah. The police were vicious and the bosses used every weapon the anti-union laws had given them. The TUC, at first, huffed and puffed about support but then it caved in and ordered the NGA to surrender, prompting Thatcher, in words heavy with sarcasm, to say of Len Murray, ?I welcome the gracious action of the General Secretary of the TUC.? Later, Murray claimed, quite possibly truthfully, that the NGA leaders themselves had pleaded with him to find them a way out of the strike.

In early 1984, Thatcher launched another vicious provocation and banned trade unions at the government?s listening station, GCHQ, on the grounds of ?national security?. The workers there voted to fight but, again, the TUC surrendered without a blow being struck, and the first major attempt to forcibly de-unionise an entire workforce succeeded.

No wonder Scargill and the militant miners were determined not to let the TUC get their hands on the strike. As the section of British workers most educated in their own union?s history, they also remembered the strike of 1926, when the TUC, having called off the general strike after nine days, left the miners to go down to defeat after fighting alone for six months. They rightly feared that the TUC would intervene in the strike only to rob them of the fruits of victory. The influential bosses? magazine, The Economist, showed that it, too, had the same measure of Murray and Co:

?Already the TUC has offered Mr Scargill its collective embrace. Thus do the trade union barons declare their interests in a strike, so as to manipulate the eventual settlement. In the 1982 rail strike they offered themselves as honest brokers ? enforcing a settlement on the train drivers by threatening withdrawal of collective support? Mediation of this kind would be a second best outcome to a straight defeat of Mr Scargill, which should be tried first.? (21 April 1984)

When Scargill told the TUC to keep its nose out, this had total support from the most militant rank and file miners. As one, Robert from South Wales, told Workers Power, ?You can forget the TUC and Len Murray.?

Understandable, but wrong. Certainly, it was right to deny the TUC any negotiating rights on behalf of the miners. That would have ensured defeat. However, ?forgetting? to put the traitors in our midst on the spot weakened the fight for solidarity. To achieve this, the miners needed a twin-track approach. On the one hand, they needed to issue a direct appeal to the rank and file of every other union, especially those under the threat of imminent job losses themselves, to build a common front of struggle around common goals. On the other, it was necessary to demand solidarity from the TUC itself.

Every union leader should have been forced to show their hand: were they with the miners or not? If they were, then they must deliver not just money to the miners? strike fund but action to bring victory. Certain unions were critical to getting solidarity. Workers in the power stations were facing closures and privatisation themselves. The rail workers, a huge part of whose jobs depended on transporting coal, were also under attack by the Tories. The TGWU could have stopped many of the lorries that were being used to move scab coal. The steel workers, also facing massive closures, could have been drawn into action to defend their own jobs.

Many sections of militants in these industries took great risks to give solidarity to the miners, observing picket lines and escalating local disputes. Rank and file organisation within and between the unions could have spread the action to mass proportions. The right wing leaders, like John Lyons and Eric Hammond, could have been isolated and defeated. The failure to do this led to a repetition of the very problem that had led to the Notts and other Midlands miners not joining the strike. More hesitant, less spontaneously sympathetic, workers in these other industries could claim that they had received no instructions from their unions to honour miners? picket lines and industry could carry on functioning, protected by the growing militarised police presence at every potential target for the flying pickets.

Once again, Scargill placed his reliance on the left bureaucracy ? Ray Buckton of ASLEF, Jimmy Knapp of the NUR (today the RMT) ? to get solidarity for the miners. The NUM contacted other unions and asked them not to touch scab coal. Pickets were dispatched to key coking plants and to the major blast furnaces of what was left of the British steel industry. The ?Triple Alliance? ? coal, steel and rail ? was summoned and its leaders solemnly swore to support the miners. In contrast, apart from a weekly phone conversation between Len Murray and Peter Heathfield of the NUM, the TUC was kept out of the whole struggle. This was fine by them, as the TUC?s own minutes smugly recorded in May:

?The general council should be content to wish the NUM well in their struggle and leave it at that unless the NUM made a special request.?

Scargill hoped that the NUM itself could get the key unions to stop touching coal. The danger was already evident here, but it took revolutionary communists with an understanding of the bureaucratic caste at the head of the unions to see it, and say it. It meant, of course, fierce arguments with the very best and most militant miners, those influenced by Scargill. In the same paper in which Robert told us to ?forget the TUC?, Workers Power warned:

?Whilst we need to build class wide action from below we shouldn?t let the TUC get away with total inactivity... If we let them get away with doing nothing they will be free to ?intervene? at the first difficult turn of events or whenever they see a weak spot in the struggle.? (2 May 1984)

Our warning was proved only too true. In the first place, the Triple Alliance proved to be as much of a broken reed as its historic predecessor in the1920s. Within hours of the steel union, the ISTC, declaring its solemn support for the miners, its right wing leader, Bill Sirs, announced to the press that it was vital to keep steel production going, even if this meant using scab coal. The steel workers, he insisted were not going to be ?sacrificed on someone else?s altar.?

This should have sparked a call to arms for steel workers to rise up against Sirs, and build a common front to save the interlinked industries, coal and steel, and for the other union leaders to call Sirs to account within the TUC for sabotaging a struggle vital to all the unions.

But Scargill did not launch a public fight against Sirs. Worse, the regional NUM bureaucracies actively sought local deals with ISTC branches at the key plants of Ravenscraig in Scotland, Scunthorpe in Lincolnshire (supplied by coal from South Yorkshire), and Port Talbot and Llanwern in South Wales. The problem was that the NUM confined its proposal to asking steel workers to support the miners. But steel workers had been through a major strike four years earlier, and been defeated. Closing down the steel works for lack of coal threatened their own jobs. Only a clear commitment by miners to unite with steel workers in a common fight to defend the jobs in both industries could have overcome this fear. Such an appeal could have been an inspirational alliance in defence of jobs.

The exact opposite happened. The NUM regional officials in Yorkshire, Scotland and South Wales, struck deals with the steel union to exempt their plants from the call not to use coal. Pickets were called off the steel plants and steel production continued. In Scotland, Mick McGahey announced that the exemption for Ravenscraig was ?in the interests of Scotland?s industrial future.? This typical reformist, in this case Stalinist, position of putting the national interest before the class struggle, saved neither the Scottish pits nor Ravenscraig, which was closed in 1992, but it did have a terrible effect on the strike. It meant that the key target industry that the NUM had tried to close down, in order to make the strike bite during the spring, when power cuts would be unlikely, failed at the first attempt.

While Scargill himself was furious that the exemptions had been granted, his respect for the federal rules of the NUM meant that he was unable to challenge McGahey in Scotland, Emlyn Williams in South Wales or Jack Taylor in Yorkshire, for their truly fatal error. Despite some later attempts to close the plants by mass picketing, the damage was done and the blast furnaces were getting as much coal as they needed to keep going.

The rail unions did deliver far better solidarity action, with rank and file workers stopping trains carrying coal from the pitheads or from the scab areas. Hardly any coal moved by rail (or by sea, with the Seafarers? union playing an honourable role) throughout the strike. Particular tribute should be paid to the ASLEF and NUR workers at Coalville, in the heart of Leicestershire, where NUM strikers numbered precisely thirty, the heroic ?Dirty Thirty? as they came to be known. At the Coalville freight depot, the rail workers were asked by their unions not to move coal trains on 4 April 1984. They didn?t. No scab coal moved. The workers were then faced with bribery, intimidation, the shipping in of scabs and victimisation. They stood absolutely firm throughout the strike.

What a contrast with their union leaders! Ray Buckton of ASLEF was a case in point. This ?left winger? was chair of the TUC during the strike. He had a duty not only to support the miners but also to back up his own members who were loyally taking action to stop scab coal. Instead, echoing the famous TUC line that they had not been asked by the NUM for help, he declared, ?We cannot say, what help, if any, we can offer.?

The rail union leaders, who had accepted an inflated wage rise on behalf of their members which everyone recognised to be a Tory bribe, refused to call such action. They left the rank and file rail workers to stand alone against an offensive that culminated in the loss of thousands of rail jobs and the privatisation of the network.

Meanwhile, the Tories compensated for the rail workers? blacking by deploying thousands of lorries, run by anti-union small businessmen, to transport coal.

The Battle of Orgreave

Faced with the impasse in steel, and with the Tories? use of the hauliers to move coal, Scargill changed strategy. He recognised now that he would have to close the coking plants that supplied the steel industries? furnaces. He actively sought a major confrontation. After all, this had worked in 1972 when flying pickets from Yorkshire, with the support of thousands of Birmingham engineers and car workers, had, famously, closed the gates at the Saltley coking plant in the West Midlands. It might work again. And so began the struggle to close down the Orgreave coking plant outside Sheffield. It had been drafted in to supply Scunthorpe when the steel plant?s supplies ran low and the poor quality of the coal it was getting caused an explosion in one of the furnaces.

The battle of Orgreave supplied some of the most memorable scenes of the Great Strike. Thousands of young miners, under the direct generalship of Scargill, who was arrested and injured during the struggle to close the plant, hurled themselves repeatedly at the massed ranks of police, ten lines deep and backed up by heavily armed snatch squads and cavalry squadrons brought from all over the country. This again shows how far removed Scargill was from the normal union leader.

Police violence exceeded anything that had gone before. Yet, for four weeks in May and June, thousands of miners and their supporters kept coming back to the little lane, flanked by hedges and cornfields, that led to the plant. No amount of injuries or arrests could stop them from coming. Their physical bravery was breathtaking. At Scargill?s signal, the cry of ?here we go? would rise to a crescendo followed by a charge right into the police ranks. Time and again beaten back, with blood streaming from head wounds, the miners would regroup and try again. No one held back. No one hesitated.

However, two things necessary to win the battle of Orgreave, and turn the tide of the strike, were lacking. The first was recognition of the new reality of state violence and preparation to counter it. The second was a political strategy to use the battle to spread the strike, to actively campaign for solidarity strike action, starting in South Yorkshire but spreading nationally.

The police were no longer a thin blue line willing and able to engage in a bit of good humoured push and shove with pickets, as they had been in the early 1970s. They had been transformed into a paramilitary organisation for the express purpose of smashing mass pickets. The pickets could no longer dislodge them by weight of numbers alone. It was essential to advance new methods of struggle, to train organised picket defence squads, disciplined and well equipped, willing and able to meet the systematic violence of the police with equally systematic resistance. There was no other way to physically break through. For every extra picket and supporter we could bring down to the lane, the police could outflank us thanks to their military organisation and discipline.

Workers Power argued at the time ? and with direct experience of the fighting, we were not lecturing miners from cosy armchairs miles away ? that building picket defence squads was vital to victory at Orgreave. It was also the only means of putting an end to the huge number of injuries and arrests being suffered every day:

?Instead of disorganised charges at impenetrable police lines, we need our own wedges of the toughest, best trained, probably younger pickets who know that their job is not just to push but to carve a way through police lines. Backed up by the mass of pickets these squads can break the police lines and defend pickets against police snatch squads. None of this is ?fantastic? or ?impossible?. The fact that pickets have used telegraph poles against the police shows that the will to fight is there. Revolutionaries need to argue for the organisation of that will into a fighting force ? specially trained workers? defence squads.? (6 June 1984)

This call had a resonance amongst rank and file miners, who fought for measures to actually implement defence organisation, especially in the Doncaster area. Militants from the Hatfield Main, Armthorpe and Goldthorpe pits proposed measures for the issuing of protective headgear, sturdy placards and better organisation on the picket line. Their resolution, which stated that ?a body of pickets equipped in such a fashion would lift the morale of our men no end?, showed how far militant miners had moved in just three months of bitter class struggle. They were actively fighting for revolutionary methods in the situations in which they found themselves. Typically, the left Labour and Communist Party dominated Yorkshire Area Strike Committee, the regional bureaucracy, ?noted? these proposals and did nothing to implement them.

The same criticisms apply to the second, and even more important condition for victory at Orgreave, strike action by other workers. Picketing alone, however mass it might have been, could not have brought victory on its own. In fact, Arthur Scargill?s victory at Saltley Gate, on 10 February 1972, recognised by all sides as the decisive moment in the miners? victory, provided the crucial lesson. It was solidarity strike action by other workers that had turned the tide. For ten days, at Saltley, the police stopped the miners? pickets closing the plant. Then 40,000 Birmingham engineering workers went on strike and 10,000 of them marched to Saltley. When the police saw them coming they panicked and the inspector running the show screamed to his fellow officers the very slogan of the picket line ? ?Close the gates!? Solidarity action brought victory.

The mass picket, and the heroic battle at Orgreave, were essential but primarily as a detonator of working class solidarity. Orgreave stood on the outskirts of Sheffield. The Communist Party controlled the shop stewards? committees of virtually every plant in the town. There was a living tradition of solidarity and struggle. There was every possibility that workers would respond to the call for strike action in support of people they saw every day on the television being terrorised by police thugs. And they could have marched en masse to help the miners close Orgreave once and for all.

Workers Power members fought for this perspective in the city, trying to get the Trades Council to issue the call. When it took even a half hearted position we used that to leaflet all of the key factories in the town. The Communist Party resolutely blocked the call for action. Scargill failed to come into the city and issue such a call, indeed, no major rallies were held in the city during the month long battle. Predictably, the Yorkshire leadership, having already negotiated the continued production of steel at Scunthorpe on the grounds that keeping industry going would save jobs (it didn?t, it cost thousands of jobs shortly afterwards) made no appeal to the South Yorkshire labour movement to strike.

The result was that the miners were left to fight alone, apart from the individuals or small groups of militants who went out to help them. The battle of Orgreave failed to achieve its objectives. It did not shut down coke production, or stop the movement of coal and coke, and steel production continued. Worse still, it opened up a new phase of policing the strike, the Yorkshire miners were thrown onto the defensive. The first instances of scabbing occurred in South Yorkshire and pickets had to turn their attention to their own pits.

At the same time, there was police invasion of the pit villages themselves and a veritable occupation by a militarised police force. From the summer of 1984, the pit villages started to look like the streets of Northern Ireland?s cities, as heavily armoured vans and shield bearing snatch squads took up positions in the communities. Their aim was to intimidate the miners, their families and their supporters, but these brutal tactics failed. The occupation of the villages met with constant and determined physical opposition, but it had to be recognised that the miners were now on the defensive. The search for victory now shifted to the search for solidarity action from key sectors of workers who were also under threat from the Tories.

The rank and file, the dockers and the general strike

During the battle of Orgreave, Jimmy Knapp of the NUR and Ray Buckton of ASLEF both promised the miners ?100 per cent support?. The two men, both supposed left allies of the NUM on the TUC, however, then settled a pay dispute with the Tories for far less than their claim. Knapp greeted a 5.6 per cent pay offer, slightly above the going rate at the time, as a ?victory?. The rise itself was tied to productivity improvements which threatened 38,000 redundancies in the rail industry ? eventually carried out once the miners? strike was over. Alongside this, Sealink was being privatised at a huge cost to jobs. The only victory, therefore, was for the Tories. The Ridley Plan, buying off other sections while fighting the miners, worked all too well, thanks to the left bureaucrats running the rail unions.

Scargill said nothing about this sell out, even though rank and file rail workers, like those at Coalville, were furious. He regarded Buckton and Knapp as allies and told his members to trust them. This was a terrible mistake, and living proof that, despite Scargill?s unwavering commitment to the struggle, his strategy was not working. Rank and file miners had no business placing unqualified trust in any trade union bureaucrat. The Triple Alliance had not brought the results miners had hoped for, because of the trade union bureaucracy. The same bureaucracy had left the miners to fight alone at Orgreave. The task now was to organise to fight this bureaucracy. The goal of such a fight had now become clear to many of the most militant miners: they needed the active support of other workers, they needed solidarity strike action, in short, they needed a general strike.

This conclusion was an important breakthrough in the strike. It led to the acceptance of revolutionary socialists, who were arguing for just such a strategy and fighting with all their might to deliver such action, by the most fervent pro-Scargill militants. At the start of the strike, many miners were willing to accept support from any quarter, but they were unwilling to accept any criticism of Scargill or any suggestion that his strategy was wanting. They proudly informed any would-be recruiters to far left groups that ?the NUM is my party?. They bought the idea that the TUC should not only be kept from having any control over the dispute (a completely correct view) but that it should also not be called on to put the resources of the entire labour movement at the disposal of the miners (an incorrect view). All of this stemmed from the syndicalist aspect of Scargill?s politics, passed on by a thousand connecting threads to the rank and file, that the NUM could go it alone, show everyone how it is done and take the plaudits for being the one and only union that could bring down Thatcher.

When Workers Power members went to Hatfield Main at the start of the strike to offer support, we were warmly welcomed. When we offered advice, the response was polite, but our proposals were ignored. A local official had issued a pamphlet warning miners about the ?lefties? who would arrive and claim to have all the answers. Like Scargill himself, this official was convinced that the NUM had all the answers and could go it alone. After Orgreave, that attitude changed, suddenly and dramatically. Our arguments in favour of a general strike were listened to seriously. Militants began to take it up in the union. A minority began to openly question whether or not Scargill was right on this. A real dialogue began over the question of workers? self defence. Now we were welcomed and listened to, not in spite of our ideas, but because of them.

Of course, sharp disagreements continued. We could still get cornered in the gents of the welfare club, and be told we had a rotten line on the Spanish civil war by miners who had been alive when it was being waged. Nonetheless, as the strike entered the summer, the atmosphere changed. Miners were beginning to ask, ?what now?? As well as being able to give, and take, hard knocks on the picket line, it became clear that miners were capable of some hard thinking, too. The fight for a general strike, spearheaded by rank and file miners, themselves becoming an army of agitators in the class as a whole, was increasingly seen as the way forward.

Workers Power had argued from the beginning of the dispute for a general strike to smash the anti-union laws the moment they were used, or when serious repression was unleashed. This was not because we were fetishists of the general strike or because we believed the TUC would willingly deliver such action. The reason was simple. The attack on the miners was not fundamentally about the economics of coal. It was a deliberate attempt to snap the spine of the entire working class. Therefore, it was in the direct interests of all sections of the class and, indeed, of all sections of the socially, racially and nationally oppressed (in Northern Ireland for example) to rally to the miners and win with them.

The problem was that only revolutionary Marxists drew the conclusion that this class wide attack required an active, class wide response. A wave of strikes, uniting the wage claims and job struggles of the whole labour movement and linking those struggles to the offensive goal of smashing the anti-union laws, was necessary if the miners were to win. This was not a product of our intelligence or perception. We recognised that the wider interests of the whole class were at stake. This was a product of our politics, revolutionary communism.

If this was what we believed, we considered it our elementary duty to fight for it in order to win people to translating the slogan into reality. Even Mick McGahey, a dyed-in-the-wool-Stalinist, was provoked into calling on workers to ?halt industry in this country?. The difference between McGahey and us was that he was not prepared to fight for that goal by denouncing the sabotage and betrayals of the union leaders and calling on their members to bring them to order and take control over their own struggles. We were. We began to organise meetings of miners who agreed with us. We helped form networks between these miners at a series of well attended meetings. We began to put together an embryonic rank and file movement, capable of acting independently of the officials when they failed to measure up to the tasks of the day. We believed that direct appeals to the rank and file workers, workers such as those on the rail who had not moved a piece of coal from day one of the strike, could deliver results.

As the strike moved towards the summer, and Scargill was forced to pin his hopes on the arrival of ?General Winter? as the only strategy for winning, the rank and file acceptance of the need for solidarity strike action, even a general strike, gathered pace. A leaflet put out by Kent miners read, ?From rank and file miners, to rank and file dockers: Start the second front now.? On 9 July, the TGWU finally acted. Under enormous pressure from rank and file dockers, Ron Todd called a national dock strike. It lasted until 21 July. This came on the back of print workers shutting down production of The Sun when it refused to print replies by strikers to the lies being peddled by the paper. However, unlike the printers? action, the dockers? was an all out strike, not a one day protest.

This strike had the potential to change the course of the whole struggle. It was sparked by the refusal of TGWU dockers, then part of the National Dock Labour Scheme (abolished at enormous cost to jobs in 1989) to touch iron ore that rail drivers had refused to touch. The ore was bound for Scunthorpe, which the miners were still seeking to shut down. The dockers at Immingham walked out. The TGWU called a national strike. All dockers knew that the Tories were gunning for the Dock Labour Scheme and, just as clearly, they recognised that they had common cause with the miners if the jobs of both industries were to be saved.

Ironically, the strike came at a time when the majority on the miners? Executive were looking for a settlement. Talks had been going on and a package was actually being considered. Scargill was opposed to the proposed deal but, after Orgreave, the more conciliatory bureaucrats within the NUM were systematically undermining him. The dock strike helped him win a rejection of the Coal Board?s package, and harden the demands of the strike, at the NUM national conference on 12/13 July. On 21 July, however, following a riot at Dover by our old friends the hauliers, portrayed by the media as honest men trying to earn a decent living, despite the fact that they tried to burn down the docks at Dover, the TGWU caved in and negotiated a deal to end the strike.

Militant dockers were horrified. Their leaders had joined the battle. The rank and file had seen a chance to put paid to any Tory attack on the Dock Labour scheme. The second front was open and the bosses were thrown into blind panic. How could they cope with both a dock strike and a miners? strike? Thatcher confessed to aides that the game was up, she was about to go the way of Heath. The Economist, so long a Thatcher fan sheet published a front page cartoon of her slipping on the banana skin of taking on two powerful sections of workers at once. It wrote:

?The City, already growing edgy about the miners? strike, had taken fright on Monday when dockers said they would join them.?

The ruling class was splitting. The workers, it seemed, were at last uniting. Rail workers redoubled their call for a strike across the transport network. In every Miners Support Committee around the country, the talk turned towards spreading the action. Victory, total victory, and a general strike that could have smashed the entire Tory offensive, were on the agenda. The memoirs of one of Thatcher?s aides records that when she received the news of the dock strike she broke down and wept. Ah! What a sight that must have been!

Then, along came Ron Todd and John Connolly (the national officer for the docks in the TGWU) and saved her from disaster. They did not demand a single firm pledge that the Dock Labour Scheme would be preserved. They obtained no written or public undertakings that scab coal or ore would not be unloaded at ports registered with the scheme. Yet they settled. They settled because they were more afraid of the action by the joint pickets of miners and dockers that was beginning to close the non-unionised ports, than they were of the Tories.

The militants in the TGWU did not take this contemptible betrayal lying down. They regrouped and, when scab labour was, indeed, used to unload coking coal bound for Ravenscraig at the Hunterston docks, the leadership were forced to call a second strike, on 23 August. It lasted until 18 September. But, once again, the TGWU leadership stepped in, negotiated a local deal at Hunterston, which allowed scab coal to be unloaded , and called off the strike. Connolly went so far as to threaten:

?If the miners put on a picket line the unions concerned will work their policy? We will continue to operate the dock at Hunterston.?

This time, the militants in the TGWU, outflanked by their supposedly left leaders, were incapable of getting a third strike. The leaders of the TGWU had saved Thatcher. Instead of denouncing Todd and Connolly, instead of appealing directly to TGWU dockers over their heads, instead of linking the fight to stop pit closures to the fight to defend the Dock Labour Scheme, Scargill went on radio to say that Ron Todd ?knew what he was doing?. Indeed, he did. Scargill rightly attacked the deal that settled the dock strike, but he did not break with the bureaucratic architects of that deal. This failure to attack fellow bureaucrats was becoming a pattern with Scargill and it was a pattern that was calling forth more and more scepticism from the most militant miners.

The final six months

The first six months of the strike were an offensive by the miners on capitalism. The second six months saw them forced onto the defensive, leading to a tragic and unnecessary defeat. This period began with an about turn by Scargill with regard to the TUC. He had kept them at a distance from the strike. His motivation was honourable. He did not want these traitors to get control of the dispute so that they could sell it out, as they had done on Black Wednesday, 13 December 1983, when they ordered the NGA to end the strike at the Stockport Messenger. His tactics, however, were wrong. From the start, he should have called on them to mobilise active solidarity action up to and including a general strike. The NUM urgently needed this. In the summer, mass strike action by rank and file miners, railworkers and dockers could have forced TUC to call a general strike without giving them a stranglehold over the disputes, just as they had nearly been forced to do by similar action from below in 1972. They could have been forced to act and, in action, the right wingers and traitors could have been driven out of the movement altogether by a determined rank and file challenge.

A rank and file movement, across the unions, was what was needed to organise such a rebellion. Born in the heat of such a struggle, it would have had enormous resources at its disposal. The strike had created an alternative national apparatus. Sympathetic printers, support groups, trade union offices, miners? clubs, left groups? offices across the country could all have been placed at the disposal of such a movement.

Instead, Scargill went to the TUC and did a deal with them which effectively placed control of solidarity in the hands of Len Murray or, rather, his hapless successor Norman Willis and his ?New Realists? since Murray resigned after the 1984 Congress. This gang consisted of real business unionists like Hammond of the electricians and Sirs of the steel union. They forthrightly announced that they would not support the miners. The softer right agreed a TUC statement that promised unspecified physical and financial support to the miners because they feared that anything else would tie them to action. As Murray himself put it, he was ?not over the moon? about the TUC statement supporting the miners, but it was better than ?the alternative which is to allow those amendments [which called for definite action] to stand?. Scargill argued that the statement eventually passed, with only scabs like Hammond voting against it, meant that ?Congress has placed itself squarely behind our campaign?. He didn?t add, ?all the better to stab us in the back?. But he should have.

What the TUC did do was gain control over union solidarity. This meant that it was able to issue precise instructions. These boiled down to: money for miners? welfare, yes; action for miners? victory, no?. As one journalist commented, the TUC gave the miners a blank cheque, but conveniently omitted to sign it. Moreover, given the inevitable hardships that were arising after nearly seven months on strike, control over money was now very important. It gave the TUC leverage over the dispute itself. As the Financial Times journalist, and author of a pamphlet on the strike, John Lloyd put it, there was now the basis for a ?bid by the TUC leaders to win a degree of control over the dispute as a quid pro quo for delivering the kind of support promised this week at TUC congress?.

By September, it is fair to say that only a general strike could have won the miners? strike. What was needed at Congress was a fight for such a strike. No such fight came from the miners and the TUC were, once again, let off the hook. Once off the hook, they set about trying to negotiate a deal. The focus for the deal with a wing of the NCB management led by Ned Smith was, ironically, a dispute that arose between the Coal Board and the supervisory union in the pits, NACODS. Belatedly, the cowardly leadership of NACODS had called a strike ballot over the closure programme. The result of the ballot startled everyone, not least the TUC and NACODS leaders, 82.5 per cent in favour of a strike. If NACODS had struck there would have been no coal at all. For safety reasons, the pits could not have operated without the pit deputies (which NACODS organised). At long last the scab coalfields would have been closed down.

Thatcher, once again, faced the awful outcome that shook the Iron Lady?s famous resolve during the July dock strike. So, what did the TUC and NACODS leadership do? Exactly what Ron Todd had done; they rushed to her aid. They agreed a deal at the end of October, under which the pit closure programme would be carried out, but only after local tripartite negotiation between the unions, bosses and local representatives of ACAS (the arbitration service). The first ever national strike by NACODS was called off before it started. This deal, carried through with the approval of a TUC that had promised to support the miners, achieved two things. First, it ensured that, from November 1984, the NUM would be left to fight absolutely on its own. Second, it gave the conciliators within the NUM a way out of the dispute. It even led loyal Scargill allies like Peter Heathfield to argue that this might be the only way forward. The push for a similar deal between the NUM and the NCB was only scuppered by Thatcher?s own intervention. Rapidly recovering her nerve at the sight of the union leaders? cowardice, she ordered MacGregor to resist the Ned Smith conciliation approach because now there was a real chance of defeating the NUM outright.

After this, it became a question of digging in, which was very much the character of the strike in its final months. Collecting money usurped picketing. Survival replaced the fight for solidarity action. The key task became holding the union organisation together in the face of massive Coal Board bribes which led to a ?return to work? movement in a number of coalfields. Stories of miners returning to work, with graphs and figures, replaced stories of picket line incidents in the press and television and it became clear to all that the strike was in mortal danger.

As this movement gathered pace in the run up to and aftermath of Christmas, the Tories calculated that they had won. Throughout the dispute there had been on/off negotiations between the NCB and the NUM. Those talks had, on a number of occasions, come close to producing a settlement. Indeed, during July, when the dockers were about to strike, the terms of the settlement offered could have been claimed as a partial victory by the NUM, reflecting the strength of the strike and the fear of the ruling class. By the autumn, however, not only after the NACODS fiasco but also after the power workers had been instructed by their right wing leaders to accept scab coal, an act that the total silence of the TUC sanctioned, Thatcher?s position hardened.

She now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the TUC would not deliver any action to support the miners. After all, both the ?left?, in the shape of the TGWU, and the right, in the engineering union, had just executed a sell out in the car industry that kept yet another section of workers out of the firing line while the Tories blasted away at the miners. With a new bravado, Thatcher vetoed anything that smacked of granting any concession at all to the NUM. In October, she unleashed the full force of the anti-union laws and the class spite of the judiciary, the more venomous because of the frights they had suffered over the summer months. The courts now declared the national strike unlawful. Sequestrators were dispatched to the four corners of the globe to seize the NUM?s funds, which Scargill had wisely moved to secret accounts abroad. When the TUC did nothing in the face of this outrage, she knew she had only to hold on to win. By late January, she instructed MacGregor to demand the unconditional surrender of the NUM. Defeat was staring the miners in the face.

Things were now desperate but there was nothing to be won by compromise or half measures. A truly revolutionary policy might have turned things around. It would have depended on Scargill directing his supporters into an army of rank and file agitators going directly to other workers to fight for solidarity action, in total defiance of the bureaucrats in each union and of the TUC itself. He did, at long last, make calls for a general strike and aligned himself with militants in a campaign to resume mass picketing but, by this time, he had far fewer troops and his enemies within the NUM executive were closing in for the kill. Even some of his closest allies, like general secretary Peter Heathfield, began to shift towards surrender and a whispering campaign grew in the union that the strike would soon be over. There were more overt attempts to get it called off by Emlyn Williams in South Wales. He pleaded with the TUC to broker an honourable surrender declaring that the dispute was now ?more the property of the TUC general council?. Yes indeed, if it is a surrender you want, then call in the old firm.

A small number of militants, hundreds rather than thousands, awoke to the need to organise against this drift. Based on the beleaguered striking minorities in the scab coalfields the small nucleus of a rank and file movement came into being. Militants, working closely with Workers Power, organised to carry out the sort of actions that Scargill said he supported but would not openly call for direct pickets of workplaces, open attacks on the traitors, a fight for general strike action and the resumption of mass picketing. Valiant attempts to resume mass picketing and, in February, to organise mass solidarity action, were made. The movement came together around demands for a greater say by the strikers over negotiations and on the demand for there to be no return to work until every victimised miner had been reinstated. The beginnings of this movement, which formally established the National Rank and File Miners Movement after the strike, shows what could have been, had the forces of revolutionary communism been stronger.

Indeed, if the two largest organisations which called themselves ?revolutionaries? or ?Trotskyists?, the Socialist Workers Party and the Militant Tendency, had used their several thousand cadres to fight for a revolutionary policy at every stage of the strike, instead of tailing Scargill at best, things might have been very different. But the SWP boycotted the miners? support groups for the first six months of the strike, claiming that a ?downturn? in the class struggle doomed the miners to defeat. When they belatedly joined the fray, they acted as mere cheerleaders for Scargill, declaring the general strike slogan to be ?impossible? and simply calling for ?bigger? mass pickets. Militant, on the other hand, had a unique opportunity to open up a third front ? right in the midst of the dockers? strike. They had enormous influence ? and a majority of Labour councillors ? in Liverpool, where the Council was waging a heroic struggle against Thatcher?s rate-capping policy, which was shredding public services and jobs in the inner cities. But, rather than call a city wide general strike alongside the miners and dockers, Militant negotiated a settlement which took Liverpool?s working class out of the battle.

These centrists were Marxists in words only. When it came to deeds they were left reformsists or syndicalists. As we have seen, there was no shortage of these false strategies, homegrown, in the NUM. Once again, they showed that they were not revolutionaries but centrists: revolutionaries in words only but reformists in the day to day politics they addressed to workers in struggle.

By February, with no new strategy coming from Scargill, whole sections of the leadership, especially in South Wales where the influence of the now Blairite minister Kim Howells, then a type of soft Stalinist, was strong, had made their minds up. The rank and file, though it began to organise through the National Rank and File Miners? Movement, lacked the strength to stop the move within the leadership against Scargill?s intransigence. On 3 March 1985, the conciliators won when the NUM?s national delegate conference voted by 98 votes to 91 to return to work without a settlement of the dispute. After a year of class war, the miners had lost.

Defeat or ?moral victory??

After the strike, Arthur Scargill claimed there had been no defeat. He claimed that the strike had secured a moral victory. Twenty years on, with the NUM reduced to 3,000 members, this conclusion looks like the ravings of a man driven wild by defeat and betrayal. At the time, however, it made more sense and most people on the left repeated it without question. Certainly, the strike itself was indeed a triumph of matchless courage and class solidarity over incredible odds. Surely, on the basis of this fight, the hundreds of thousands of those who had waged it could have pressed forward?

No. Even then it was totally wrong. The task was not to soft soap people about the outcome of their struggle. It was to tell the truth, no matter how bitter, and say, ?We have been defeated?. A mighty ruling class offensive will now be launched against the whole class. We have to learn the lessons of our defeat, to organise the rank and file to hold the line, link up the militants and organise the best defence we can. At the same time, we have to take the fight against the traitors into every union branch and workplace so that no more such defeats are inflicted upon us courtesy of their treachery. This was not done and that was why the miners? defeat became a strategic one for the whole class, the evil effects of which have not been fully overcome to this day. All out indefinite strikes are still regarded as impossible: the anti-union laws are unchangeable: a general strike is a historic dream.

Worse than Scargill?s delusions of victory, however, were the ?revisionist? celebrations of its defeat. The Eurocommunists, who dominated the Communist Party, rushed to take up their bile-filled pens to denounce the strike. The CP industrial organiser, Pete Carter, decided that the strike failed because it did not sufficiently woo ?public opinion.? Abandoning any class standpoint, he said that, if Scargill had denounced his own members from the beginning with ?an early condemnation of violence from whichever quarter it came?, all might have been well. Mass pickets and strikes were in any case ?old-style.? A new ?non-class? based politics was needed in order to woo public opinion.

We take a different view, now as then. We do not blame the defeat of the miners either on long term trends, or on patronising nonsense about their belonging to a world as outdated as a Hovis advert. Still less do we blame it on the first president the union had for decades who was prepared to fight. Least of all do we blame it on the thousands of men and women from the pit villages, who, as a result of that year of struggle, will forever be regarded as the real heroes and heroines of the labour movement, just as David Jones and Joe Green are its martyrs. They are, as Marx said of the Communards, ?enshrined in the great heart of the working class?. The likes of Kinnock and Willis, on the other hand, may have drawn fat salaries for lording it over the TUC and the Labour Party for years, but their names will go down in history, marked with infamy, like Jimmy Cooke or Ramsay Macdonald. They, along with Thatcher, are, in Marx?s words, ?already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them.?

Rather, it is the task of revolutionaries to transmit the lessons of that great struggle to the youth born during or since that strike so that they can profit from in the great battles which lie ahead. The fighters on the streets of Genoa, the generation of Carlo Giuliani, will know how to profit by these lessons. Militancy without a revolutionary political strategy is insufficient to meet the demands of modern class struggle. Even a fearless and determined leader will be broken by the cowardly bureaucratic caste that sits atop the union movement if s/he does not break from them and organise against them.

The fight for a general strike, the fight for picket defence, the fight for a rank and file movement, the fight for an alternative to capitalist economic vandalism, all require thousands of agitators to turn slogans into action. To win those thousands, the small minority of revolutionary communists had, and have, to battle against an army of trusted left reformist members.

In the tumult of a mass strike, many workers will stay loyal to those Labourites and Stalinists because they know them, because, to one degree or another, history has given them influence in the unions and communities. As Trotsky observed in relation to the Spanish workers during the civil war, ?Workers in general do not easily break with the party that awakens them to political life.?

Above all, it shows that, until we build a party rooted in every section of the working class, every community and every workplace, we will not achieve the revenge the fighters of 1984-85 so richly deserve: the end of the rotten capitalist system that robs people of work, security, dignity and a future.

Though not a party, Workers Power did set out to provide the answers to the key questions at every stage of the struggle. Of course, we did this in dialogue with miners who taught us a great deal about every aspect of the struggle. Unlike the reformists, revolutionaries have never laid claim to a monopoly of truth. But neither did we demagogically suggest that the miners, let alone their leaders, already knew all the answers spontaneously from their own experience.

No, we set out to argue for a strategy based on revolutionary principles and on the experience of the whole workers? movement in Britain and, indeed, the whole world and on miners? experience throughout the twentieth century. By doing so, by convincing more and more people of that answer we grew as a revolutionary organisation, we went on to win supporters in the coalfields and, when new struggles erupted, we were much stronger than we had been.

Of course, we did not become the leadership of the strike. Our goal, however, is to become such a leadership in future struggles. The cardinal lesson of the Great Strike, like every mass struggle of the working class, is that the fight for a revolutionary outcome always and everywhere takes us a step nearer to that goal.

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/great-miners%E2%80%99-strike-1984-85