

## REFLECTIONS ON THE MINING STRIKE

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Judgments on the course and implications of the miners' struggle should not come easily. For some on the left, no doubt, the 'lessons' of the dispute were to hand, pre-packaged, almost from the outset: predictable derivations of a more general political 'line'. Yet major historical **events** rarely mesh precisely with prior analyses and formulae. Often they call for difficult, even painful, revisions of our preconceptions.

No socialist can fail to acclaim the courage, determination and resourcefulness of the women and men in coalfields across Britain in the year-long fight to defend their jobs and communities. Endurance on this scale is without historical parallel. The odds ranged against the miners were likewise unprecedented: an arrogant and vindictive government; a paramilitary police force established by stealth and unaccountable for its often brutal conduct; a judicial system systematically hostile to the strikers and their union; agencies of public 'welfare' thoroughly subordinated to the repressive purposes of the state; press and television largely dedicated to distortion and abuse. After the retreats and demoralisation of the first five years of Thatcherism, sustained resistance against such obstacles and such deprivations offered an inspiration **which**—even in defeat—has enriched us all.

But celebration alone is not enough. For all the brave initial denials, the outcome was a crushing defeat, mitigated only partially by the positive and perhaps enduring achievements of those twelve months in transforming social relations in the striking communities and the broad movements of support. To come to terms with the sources and significance of this defeat we must move beyond uncritical applause. At the same time, little is learned if our assessment rests merely on simplistic charges of external betrayal. The contribution of the TUC and Labour Party leadership was at best inadequate; but who expected otherwise? Unless we focus critically on the conduct of the strike itself we may serve the myth-makers, but do not assist those centrally involved in the strike who, being human, cannot claim infallibility.

And yet. . . How can an outsider in the comfort of academic security venture any criticism of the strategies and tactics of comrades who struggled with such amazing fortitude against the harsh challenge to their whole social existence? And what insights can in any case be offered from

the sidelines, when so many of the combatants themselves have by now debated at length the key issues arising from the conduct of the strike? Now that the myriad tendencies and factions have defined their several contributions to the long post-mortem, is anything new to be said; and if so, can it expect a hearing?

If 'scientific socialism' is more than a vacuous slogan it entails a critical understanding of the articulations between concrete and abstract, particular and general. Most analysis to date has involved argument, often polemical, around immediate tactical questions. How far can such debates be linked to broader and more persistent problems of relevance to socialists? If the post-strike assessment is to involve more than a private settling of accounts within the coalfields and the NUM, with outsiders acting merely as partisans or spectators, some generalisation beyond the specific points of contention in the strike's aftermath must be attempted.

First, though, to survey the main areas of immediate controversy. Three questions clearly predominate: the avoidance of a ballot; mass picketing and the role of 'violence'; and the character and objectives of the dispute as a whole. Some of the arguments were raised at the very outset of the conflict; others surfaced in the summer of 1984, often in coded form, as it became evident that the prospects of victory were receding and the miners were in danger of debilitating isolation; many more were voiced publicly only with the return to work. Underlying this process was the gradual and incomplete exposure of a hidden agenda of political division, only partially related to the dispute, within the NUM left. However naive the attempt, it seems worth reconsidering these controversies as issues of importance in their own right, before addressing an alternative set of underlying problems.



'It has been like a monkey on our backs. Everywhere we've gone we've had to answer the question of the ballot: not the strike and the issue of jobs and nuclear power—the ballot.'" Its overpowering symbolism haunted the controversies within the union itself, in the broader labour movement, and among 'public opinion' more generally. The refusal to hold a national ballot provided the central rationale or pretext of those sections of the NUM who rejected all calls to join the strike, of workers in other industries reluctant to offer support, and of hostile politicians and commentators. Conversely, among strike activists, 'the ballot developed into a sort of virility symbol'.<sup>3</sup> Those not on strike had no right to vote other miners out of their jobs; those infected with the disease of 'ballotitis' were clearly hostile, or at best half-hearted, towards the strike; to refuse 'to be constitutionalised out of a defence of our jobs'<sup>3</sup> was the one worthwhile test of commitment to the defence of the industry.

The manoeuvres which avoided a ballot at the NUM Executive in April **1984**, and the confirmation of its rejection at the subsequent Special Conference, can be readily understood in the light of the experience of the previous two years. In January **1982** the press, abetted by retiring President Joe Gormley, had conducted an intensive campaign against a national strike over pay. The outcome—only a month after Arthur Scargill's personal electoral triumph—was a 55 per cent vote against a stoppage. In October the same year, over 60 per cent opposed a strike when the two issues of the new pay claim and resistance to pit closures were linked. The result was the same in March **1983**, when South Wales called for national backing in opposing the closure of Tymawr Lewis Merthyr colliery. Even before this triple rebuff, there was a view on the left that a national ballot on the issue was futile: 'those with jobs were not keen to jeopardise them while those who had experienced closures in the past resented being called on to strike for pits which had not supported them when their pits were closed'.<sup>4</sup> The ballots of **1982-3** reinforced the view that areas not directly threatened by closure should have no veto over action by those that were. Hence the strategy of co-ordinated local action under NUM rule **41**, rather than formal national action under rule **43**.

Yet the earlier defeats compounded the hazards of such a course of action. Union democracy was made a major—perhaps the major—issue, for it could be suggested that the national leadership was out of step with the majority of the membership and desperate to avoid putting their representativeness to the test. Given the Executive's willingness to organise the earlier polls, the belated discovery of a principled objection to balloting over 'other men's jobs' smacked of opportunism. The decision in October **1983** to call a national overtime ban over wages—avoiding the need for a strike ballot—could be seen even by sympathetic observers as a manipulative tactic,<sup>5</sup> anticipating the use of the Presidential authority in April **1984** to rule out of order the call for a national vote. Of course the Gormley era had seen even greater deviousness on the part of the NUM leadership; but the left professes higher standards. In appearing anxious to escape the control of the majority of the membership, the NUM leadership exposed their own legitimacy to predictable challenge. How effective a challenge became only too clear as the strike proceeded.

Ironically, a major source of the whole problem was that strike activists agreed with their opponents in treating the ballot issue as a matter of principle. Both sides endorsed the simple equation: to oppose the strike is to support the ballot; to support the strike is to oppose the ballot. A national **vote** was demanded by enemies of the strike, and for that very reason should be resisted. 'Putting a minus where the bourgeois puts a plus': an understandable reaction, examples of which can be found throughout the history of the socialist movement; but often tactically disastrous.

True, those within the NUM who demanded a ballot *were* against the strike. And those outside the union who took up the call were typically concerned to discredit the striking miners or at least their national leaders. For such critics, balloting and democracy could be presented as synonymous. Thus the provocative interventions of Jimmy Reid<sup>6</sup> not only personalised NUM policy under the label of 'Scargillism' (thus ignoring the powerful rank-and-file basis for the leadership position on all contentious questions) but also rested on a fetishism of the individual ballot as the expression of 'institutions and traditions of representative parliamentary democracy'. Such homilies were scarcely calculated to impress striking miners, whose whole struggle was directed against the anti-social policies of a government whose arrogance is sustained by the workings of 'representative parliamentary democracy'. Nor should it be necessary in any forum of the left to rehearse at length the argument that the ballot-box is not the be-all and end-all of trade union democracy. Not primarily because of the machinations of the Tory press: Fleet Street poison did not prevent Scargill's record majority in his election as NUM President; and in any event, if socialists cannot combat the influence of the media then we may all as well abandon the struggle. Far more fundamentally: an essential principle of trade unionism is the *active* involvement of members in *collective* discussion and decision-making, with the maintenance of internal relationships through which leaders can be *continuously* accountable to those they *represent*.<sup>7</sup> In itself, the individual ballot is an inferior procedure which privatises decision-making: a passive, formalistic and episodic mechanism which provides no real basis for positive membership control.'

Yet it is evident that in practice the internal procedures of most trade unions fall far short of the ideal of active collective initiative. The enthusiasm for the ballot-box expressed in similar terms by Reid and Thatcher exerts considerable popular appeal, because it appears to offer a simple solution to what are genuine problems of trade union democracy. The alienation of so many trade unionists from their own unions, which they perceive as distant, bureaucratic and unresponsive structures, creates the ingredients for the appeal of Tory populism. If members want the opportunity to ballot, leaders and activists disregard this at their peril.

In the case of the NUM, moreover, 'ballotitis' has far deeper roots. Among workers for whom social existence outside work was so often an extension and complement to collective relations in the mine itself, the *pithead* ballot was as much a public as a private act. The complex interplay of individual judgment and mutual dependence which underlay the labour process at the *coalface* surely contributed to the traditional emphasis on balloting before commencing—and often ending—large-scale strike action. Within the county associations which established the Miners' Federation a century ago, 'policy decisions had to be confirmed on a wide

range of questions by lodge ballots'. Their historian explained that 'the rules of the miners' unions and indeed their whole conception of democratic procedure laid it down that before a strike was called there must be a ballot vote of all union members'. In 1915, moreover, the miners' leaders sought to prescribe that the Triple Alliance should require a **two-thirds** majority in a ballot of **affiliated** unions before calling a joint strike: this in a body which represented, in the eyes of so many of the ruling class, a vehicle for **insurrection**.<sup>9</sup> 'The traditions of all the dead generations. . .!' Of course times have changed. Social relations both above and below ground have altered dramatically. The redundancy payment scheme directed at older miners has transformed the age structure of the labour force, half of whom were not directly involved in the stoppages of the early 1970s and doubtless care little for the practices of former decades. Yet as revolutionaries half a century ago discovered, 'trade union **le alism**' can exert a powerful influence which it is hazardous to disregard'.<sup>10</sup> One may view with cynicism the motives of some of those who appealed so vociferously to the sanctity of rule 43; but there is little reason to question the sincerity of many who demanded that the NUM leaders, directing what was in all but name a national strike, should observe the provisions of their own rulebook.

Could a ballot have succeeded; and if so, would the minority have accepted the verdict and joined the strike? We can only speculate. Pointing to the evidence of five opinion polls among miners, all of them showing substantial majority support for the struggle, Crick concludes that 'the ironic thing is that had the NUM held a national ballot in the first few months of the strike, the Left would almost certainly have won it'.<sup>11</sup> At the time the polls were viewed with some scepticism by activists, the more paranoid regarding them as a conspiracy to tempt the NUM into a ballot defeat. Certainly there is a difference between expressing an opinion to a pollster, and participating in a decision which will actually determine policy. Yet the achievement of NACODS in September in winning over 80 per cent backing for a strike reinforces the evidence that a campaign by the NUM could have succeeded. Timing would clearly have been important. An assessment written in the first weeks of the strike stressed the need for time to overcome initial doubts and hesitation: 'just as Mrs Thatcher chose to her own advantage when to have a General Election. . ., so the NUM may best be sewed by delaying its national ballot over strike action, as support builds up and gains a momentum of its own on the basis of campaigning in the **interim**'.<sup>12</sup> The April Conference, with its amendment to rule requiring a simple majority for a national strike, could have been central to such a campaign. Instead it took the fateful decision against any ballot.

A successful ballot campaign could have been a potent symbol of legitimacy, not only in presenting the union's case to the world outside,

but also in its internal relations. To refuse a national ballot on the grounds that it might be lost was to concede, in effect, that many of those actually on strike participated unwillingly. It also enabled 'working miners' to deny the charge' of blacklegging; in the absence of a duly constituted national stoppage they were observing the local democratic decision not to participate in other areas' disputes. Had a ballot majority destroyed this argument, would miners in areas like Nottinghamshire have scabbed regardless? Nobody knows; but it would have been immensely easier for strike supporters at branch and district level to win the argument. An account of the strike which applauds the leadership decision on this issue provides unwitting evidence for the contrary view: 'in most Nottinghamshire pits, those working felt they were scabbing but they also thought it would only last a few weeks until a national ballot either brought them out or ended the strike in Yorkshire'.<sup>13</sup> In other words: a national strike vote would have removed all ambiguity as to the status of the dispute in the Midlands coalfields, allowing a clear appeal not only to the demands of solidarity but also to the verdict of the union's own constitutional machinery. It was this essentially pragmatic rationale which was rejected out of hand by those who made opposition to a ballot a spurious question of principle.



The same reflex reaction of turning on their head all arguments of right-wing politicians and their media supporters—in effect allowing the enemies of the NUM to determine its policies in reverse—seemed to condition approaches to picketing. Again, principle and pragmatism interacted in ways which were perplexing and almost certainly damaging.

The miners' struggles against the Heath government created two contrasting images of picketing. One was of a lone NUM picket holding a placard at a railway bridge: a symbolic barrier which the drivers on the line below refused to cross. The other was the closure of the **Saltley** coke depot, when **10,000** Birmingham engineers marched to reinforce the miners picket line. The latter brought Arthur **Scargill** to national prominence; and arguably, it was a mythologised vision of the 'Battle of **Saltley Gates**' which inspired the emphasis on mass picketing in **1984**. Picketing can assume many forms.<sup>14</sup> It can aim to encourage existing workers to join a strike, or prevent the use of substitute labour; to stop the entry of components and raw materials or the removal of finished products. It can take place at the site of a strike, an associated workplace, or a 'third party' more distantly related to the dispute. It can be a symbolic gesture, a means of 'peaceful persuasion', or a more forceful method of barring movement. The co-ordinated deployment of mobile mass pickets had been a key tactic of Yorkshire activists in the unofficial struggles of

1969 and 1970 and the subsequent official national action: 'we launched from the coalfield here squads of cars, minibuses and buses, all directed onto predetermined targets, with five, six, seven hundred miners at a time'.<sup>15</sup> In 1984, many must have hoped for an action replay.

Such hopes were illusory for three main reasons. Firstly, the miners' triumph at **Saltley** was for the police a trauma which they spent a dozen years preparing to **exorcise**.<sup>16</sup> In 1984 the new *de facto* national police force took the class war seriously: to the miners' numerical presence they responded with even greater numbers and far superior hardware, together with trained battle-readiness. At **Orgreave** the miners looked for a repeat of Saltley, while the police were committed to have a very different outcome. The consequence was a series of mediaeval engagements in which the miners were first physically trounced and then subjected to an ideological battering with the aid of selective newsreel footage.

Of course the media image of 'picket line violence' did involve grave exaggeration and distortion. An early assessment in the *New Statesman* described 80 per cent of picket lines as 'orderly, if brusque'.<sup>17</sup> In the majority of cases only small bodies of pickets participated. And in the few occasions when mass picketing erupted into violent clashes, the explanation—discreetly ignored by the media—was typically provocation or brutality on the part of police and working miners.

Nevertheless the question remains: were such episodes, and their treatment in the media, a predictable consequence of the strategy of mass picketing? And if so, does this cast doubt on the advisability of such a strategy? The nature and function of a mass picket are at best ambiguous. Viewed most charitably, the numbers may be a gesture of collective solidarity and commitment, a moral support for those spokesmen who seek to persuade another group of workers (drivers, non-strikers) from crossing the line. But the latter, confronted by the sheer weight of numbers, may feel themselves subject to intimidation rather than peaceful persuasion; and indeed, many participants in a mass picket may take it for granted that if reasoned argument fails, the veto of force is the logical alternative. The mass picket can thus constitute a seductive short cut to convincing fellow-workers of the merits of the strikers' case. And built into the social dynamics of picketing in force can be an escalation of abuse and violence; a process which baton-happy police may intensify but do not necessarily initiate.

There can be little doubt that the early picket-line confrontations turned the divisions between Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire into an unbridgeable chasm; just as the later clashes at Ravenscraig destroyed any vestigial possibility of unity between miners and steelworkers. Much more generally, mass picketing allowed the *methods* of the strikers to overwhelm their *objectives*. It does not require a deep study of media sociology to realise that picketing aggro will prove more newsworthy

than pit closures—even without a government anxious to mould the terms of the debate. The Government may fear the industrial power of the miners, but it calculates that so long as the issue can be displaced from the industrial sphere into the political sphere, it can be treated as a problem of law and order—the defence of the right to work against mob picket violence—and all the powers of the authoritarian populist consensus can then be enlisted on the Government's side. The public can be rallied much more easily in defence of the social order than in defence of the market *order*.<sup>19</sup> It is important to stress that the evolution of the conflict scarcely required active state initiatives in news management: 'both the image and the reality of worker against worker have been given to the government on a *plate*'.<sup>20</sup> The paradox of the mass picket is that what is superficially a symbol of strength and unity can become in practice a force for impotence and division.



'To save pits and jobs, and to stimulate and revive Britain's battered economy, the **NUM** calls for the expansion of our industry in line with the Plan for Coal objective of up to 200m tonnes output per year. . . The miners have no choice but to oppose pit closure plans. Alongside workers in all of Britain's once-proud basic and manufacturing industries, we will fight—not just for ourselves and our families, but for the entire nation—and the future.''' In one sense, the objectives of the strike were clearly defined. In another, they were deeply ambiguous and remained so throughout the dispute. The **NUM** demanded a radical revision of production targets, in line with the most favourable of the scenarios envisaged in the 1974 Plan for Coal; a massive programme of investment in coal-getting and coal-using facilities; and an end to all pit closures on economic grounds. But to what extent did these demands represent maximum aspirations, the agenda for a long-term propaganda campaign; or bargaining objectives which might, as negotiations proceeded and the balance of forces became clearer, be modified and diluted; or an irreducible minimum on which no compromise could be contemplated? To approach this question from another direction: what would have counted as victory for the miners? A reprieve for Cortonwood, Polnaise, Herrington, **Bullcliffe Wood** and **Snowdown**? The withdrawal of the 6 March proposals? Guarantees against future cutbacks? Commitment to expansion? **MacGregor's** dismissal? Thatcher's resignation? No union engaged in struggle can afford to spell out its 'bottom line'; but in this dispute the limits of what was acceptable, as opposed to ideally desirable, remained more than ordinarily obscure. And this almost certainly obstructed the **NUM** in presenting its case to a wider audience.

Opposition to pit closures was itself open to a variety of interpretations.

'Economic' justifications for closure could be rejected on principle; or it could be argued that, empirically, the economic evidence did not support a closure programme. 'Opposition' could mean, minimally, a refusal to agree to closures; more actively, campaigning to keep pits open; support for pit-by-pit resistance; or an all-out stoppage.

'No pit closures unless through exhaustion' was a major demand in the revived radicalism in the NUM in 1970,<sup>22</sup> and conference commitment to this policy was achieved in 1972. But throughout the 1970s the union continued to acquiesce in such closures. Initially at least, this was in the context of the expectation of overall expansion set out in 1974.<sup>23</sup> Circumstances were transformed by three developments apparent in the latter 1970s but more starkly highlighted under Thatcher. The first was the escalating level of unemployment and the associated collapse of traditional industries in which energy use was high; the twin consequences were a slump in demand for coal and the elimination of alternative job opportunities in many mining areas. Secondly, world trade in coal became more competitive; and the pursuit of a 'strong pound' in the early Thatcher years created a price advantage for imported coal. Thirdly, the NCB's goal of concentrating production in new 'super-pits' employing advanced technology implied that even substantially increased output in the 1990s would be no guarantee against serious job loss.

The issue of pit closures was thus increasingly explosive as the 1980s approached; and the Thatcher government lit the fuse. The **Ridley** report of 1978, and the Coal Industry Act of 1980, prescribed that mining should conform to Tory norms of profitability. In February 1981 a wave of spontaneous strike action forced the NCB to withdraw its projected acceleration of closures—but only temporarily. The appointment of **Ian MacGregor** in 1983, after he had crushed the steel unions and slashed the labour force by half in only two years, signalled the approaching confrontation. The announcement of Cortonwood's closure, followed by the national plans to cut 20,000 jobs, proved that government and NCB were now ready for the clash.

Yet when provoked into a battle by the enemy, it is particularly important to define the terms of the struggle: certainly if the aim is to appeal for support to a wider public. So was the NUM objective merely to halt the escalation of a piecemeal programme of 'economic' closures which had been tolerated, though with individual instances of more forceful resistance, through the decade since the 'Plan for Coal'? Or to implement for the first time the union's long-standing policy, and veto such closures altogether?

Many of the pronouncements of the NUM leaders suggested that now, after the years of concession and compromise, the policy of 'no pit closures unless through exhaustion' would finally be enforced. A heroic stand, but was this in principle a winnable demand? In at least three respects,

mobilisation of broad support was inhibited.

Firstly, in appearing to counterpose to 'MacGregor's butchery' the absolute principle of no economic closures the NUM encouraged the image of a clash of rival 'extremisms'. *Was* the union arguing that no pit should be closed *while* coal could still be raised without undue risk of life and limb, whatever the cost of its extraction? Seeming equivocation on this issue gave the government and the NCB a valuable propaganda advantage. Moreover it seems possible that opposition to economic closures as an abstract principle diverted the NUM from critical attention to the detail of the NCB's economic arguments. How far the limited success of the NUM in propagating its case should be blamed on media hostility or its own inadequate presentation is a matter of some *controversy*.<sup>24</sup> But certainly there seems to have been no serious effort to develop a critique of the NCB's economic analysis *before* the long-awaited attack in March 1984. Andrew Glyn's systematic critique was indeed published by the union,<sup>25</sup> but not until October 1984; and little sustained use seems to have been made of it. Other studies by sympathetic economists<sup>26</sup> received even less dissemination. Nor was the evidence by academic accountants that the Board was systematically distorting its figures<sup>27</sup> deployed with particular vigour. To confront the specific content of the NCB's economic rationale would of course risk conceding that in certain circumstances economic considerations could in principle justify closure. Even if—as Glyn argued—the economic evidence supported the continued operation of all the threatened pits, circumstances could alter. But given the need to mobilise popular support, the risk surely deserved to be taken.

The second problem in defining the *principle* of 'economic' closures as the central issue of the struggle is that this fails to encompass questions of no less fundamental importance. One is that jobs can be lost *without* pit closures, as a result of restructuring of production and technological innovation. 'Coal *and* Dole' could well represent the NCB's preferred scenario. Another is that pit closures may be viewed as an inevitable feature of an extractive industry, since exhaustion may occur or extreme geological difficulties make continued operation impossible. Yet this entails that 'economic' arguments will often concern, in effect, not *whether* but *when* a given pit shall close.<sup>28</sup> The announcement of Cortonwood's imminent closure provoked the explosion because its future had so recently been 'guaranteed' for the next five years. But this still implied its closure in 1990: on grounds, presumably, acceptable to the NUM.

In an eloquent survey of the dispute, Raphael Samuel argued that 'the coal strike, when its ethical issues are addressed, appears as the contest in which economics is assembled on one side, humanity and compassion on the *other*'.<sup>29</sup> Pit closures, he emphasised, must be assessed in terms of 'the waste of human resources, the undermining of cultural autonomy. . . the destruction of a whole heritage of non-transferable skills'. Moving from

the individual effects to the social, 'the closure of "uneconomic" pits creates "uneconomic" communities'. These are arguments of crucial importance; on any humane criteria of social accounting, the NCB's 'hit list' of 'uneconomic' collieries is totally indefensible. And yet: what Samuel calls 'the hidden injuries of social change' are as real, and presumably as traumatic, when pits close through exhaustion or because operation is no longer possible within acceptable margins of safety. If the most fundamental issue is the social and economic viability of communities above the ground, overriding stress on the continued operation (at any cost?) of the pits underneath unduly restricts the terrain of argument. Greater emphasis on the social costs of closures—whatever their **cause**—and proposals for counteracting policies could have assisted a more broadly based social and political campaign.

This leads to the third issue: would any settlement of the strike short of the NUM's maximum objectives have been an acceptable outcome? And if so, was such an outcome attainable? And would a greater apparent readiness to pursue a negotiated settlement have assisted in winning support? 'No compromise' was clearly a powerful slogan among strike activists. The years of Gormley and his predecessors were seen as a time when the union was all too ready to meet the NCB at least half way though the members' interests required a more unyielding stance; **Scargill** personified a more resolute approach. Yet what George Woodcock once called the 'shoddy, shabby compromise' can stem from very different sets of motives. On the one hand it may reflect an overriding commitment to peaceful agreement as against militant struggle: an approach which **in-avoidably** leads to the emasculation of any radical challenge to capitalist priorities. On the other hand, however, compromise may stem from a realistic assessment of the prevailing balance of forces: if the odds are unfavourable, half a loaf may be the best attainable result.

Resistance within the NUM to 'sell-outs' had its counterpart within the government and the NCB: those who insisted that the miners must suffer an unqualified and humiliating defeat. But 'traditional' members of the management team were willing to contemplate a negotiated settlement, and even within the government there was probably some support for compromise. While refusal to compromise—like the refusal to **ballot**—appeared to some as a question of principle, the very fact of participating in negotiations implied a preparedness to modify some elements in the NUM position. What might a negotiating strategy have entailed? In the light of the issues raised earlier and the actual agenda of the various sets of talks between NUM, NCB and intermediaries, four major items may be suggested. Firstly, a re-assessment of the grossly misleading accounting practices whereby the NCB defines pits as uneconomic. As already indicated, the NUM did little to expose the Board's vulnerability on this score. Secondly, a definition of the method whereby the social costs of a

proposed closure could be set against the claimed economic savings. Because the union insisted on its absolute opposition to economic closures, the possibility of a case-by-case process of cost-benefit analysis was not systematically addressed. Thirdly, a radical revision of the wholly inadequate colliery review procedure. This was of course a major element among the demands pursued by NACODS in October 1984, though the NUM opposed such a course until the strike was nearing its end. Fourthly, the necessity for the NCB to provide resources for economic and social rehabilitation when pits are closed *for whatever reason*. While individual miners receive redundancy payments well above the average for industrial workers, the amount allocated by the NCB to meet social consequences of collective job loss is a derisory gesture. This is surely an urgent matter for trade union intervention.

To negotiate on these issues, however, implies acceptance that the NCB will indeed continue to close pits on 'economic' grounds—not necessarily by admitted right, but through simple superiority of power. Though precisely this tacit recognition of political reality underlay NUM actions in the preceding decade, in 1984 this position was expressly rejected. The consequence was that negotiations were dominated by face-saving efforts to maintain this principle intact: for example, by devoting major energy to identifying a 'third' category of pit closures located uneasily between 'economic' and 'exhaustion or safety'. Was this the best method of defending miners' interests? For some NUM leaders, perhaps, the negotiations were in any event conducted reluctantly as a response to external pressure, since any agreed outcome would inevitably involve compromise on the central rationale of the strike.

The content of a hypothetical negotiated settlement—as with all other speculative scenarios for the strike—must be subject to considerable argument. But by all accounts, what the NCB was willing to concede in June 1984 would have been far preferable to what the NUM strove in vain to achieve in February 1985. The agreement which for a time seemed likely after TUC involvement in September, followed shortly by the NACODS strike ballot, caused anguish in the columns of the *Economist*. Usually reliable sources suggest that Thatcher's fervent prayer was that Scargill would refuse; and so it was. A 'fudge' at that time would presumably have involved a (temporary) withdrawal of the five closures and the March document; a significantly strengthened review procedure; and agreement to discuss further the principles involved in the closure issue. Nothing, indeed, would have been firmly resolved—any more than had been by the miners' victory in 1981. But the NCB—and hence the government—would have been seen to have retreated substantially in the face of determined resistance. Both industrially and politically, the whole labour movement would have gained a massive boost. And miners would have resumed the guerilla struggle against closures with heightened

morale.<sup>30</sup>

The 'all-or-nothing' approach which rejected such an outcome could reflect one of three possible assumptions. First, that a sufficiently determined movement of industrial resistance could force NCB and government into a complete reversal of policy. This gravely exaggerates the power of even a united NUM, and neglects the decisive changes since **1972** and **1974**: a far more ruthless Tory government, a far more effective state apparatus. Second, that whatever the limitations of industrial struggle in a single industry, the miners' action would inspire a broader political movement which would overturn Thatcherism and create the environment for the NUM to achieve its objectives. Such a view totally misreads the political **climate**: in particular ignoring the degree of passive working-class assent to the government's economic project, in the absence of an alternative perceived as credible; and the obsessive refusal of the Labour Party leadership to support 'unconstitutional' challenges to the 'legitimate' government. The political resonance which the strike generated was in many respects remarkable; but apart from a relatively narrow constituency of committed support, the dominant response of sympathisers was charity rather than solidarity. The third possible assumption was that the struggle, even if defeated—and perhaps, particularly if defeated—would radicalise miners and inspire even more vigorous campaigns in the future. All the evidence supports the diametrically opposite viewpoint. Early in the strike, one writer commented that Mr **MacGregor** has long admitted that his task of running down the steel industry was made easier by the long strike that preceded it which robbed the steelworkers of their stomach for a fight. The government is hoping for a **re-run**.<sup>31</sup> There can be no serious doubt that this has indeed occurred. Peter Jenkins predicted all too accurately, a few weeks before the return to work, that 'the reality at the end of the strike will be that the balance of power has shifted decisively from union to management. . . In the new circumstances the closure programme is likely to be more radical and more costly in jobs than the programme put forward at the beginning of the dispute last **March**'.<sup>32</sup>

In short: the policy of 'fighting to the finish' extended the sacrifice and deprivation of the strike to its anniversary; intensified the divisions within the union, turning thousands of strikers into reluctant blacklegs; encouraged the NCB and government into a new phase of intransigence resulting in the return to work without a settlement. The aftermath has seen several hundred victimised strikers still unemployed; the acceptance by the NUM of precisely the same pay offer rejected in autumn **1983**; and a mood of demoralisation which the continuing militant rhetoric of some NUM leaders cannot conceal. Management at area and pit level displays a ruthless assertiveness unknown since nationalisation: a new disciplinary approach to workers, the removal or restriction of many of the customary facilities for trade union representation. The attempt to claw back the

concessions made to NACODS in the autumn (resisted with determination) is one sign of the transformed balance of power. Another—as Jenkins anticipated—is the announcement of far more drastic proposals for closures and job loss. Tory confidence after the humiliation of the NUM may well lead to yet more radical attacks on coal industry financing, quite possibly followed by the first steps towards privatisation.



I am aware that many of these arguments parallel what are by now familiar elements in a debate initiated within the 'Eurocommunist' tendency of the CPGB. For most protagonists in this controversy, however, there is presumably a hidden agenda rooted in fundamental divisions which transcend the specific issue of the coal strike. The outside observer is led to suspect that many of the conclusions drawn concerning ballots, picketing, or the public presentation of NUM objectives, derive from long-standing orientations towards a 'broad democratic alliance' rather than reflecting a distinctive analysis of the politics of trade union struggle.

To this extent, my own concern is distinctive: on the basis of the preceding discussion of NUM strategy and tactics, to address more general problems of trade union organisation and action. The analysis, it should be stressed, is exploratory and tentative. Three issues are considered: the tension between organisation and action at local or sectional level on the one hand, and national or class level on the other; the role of force in relation to consent; and the nature and significance of leadership in working-class movements. Though the theoretical status of each of these issues is clearly distinct, their practical implications intersect considerably.

It is commonly argued that the scope for democratic control in organisations or societies is inversely related to the size and heterogeneity of the constituency. The main themes of Michels' interpretation of mass working-class organisations—the existence of irresistible pressures towards oligarchic leadership and membership apathy—are widely accepted even by those who reject aspects of his *argument*.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, active participatory democracy is often considered to require, as an essential prerequisite, either close day-to-day interaction among members or else a strong sense of collective identity and cultural affinity. Hence Turner's hypothesis that effective internal democracy in trade unions is confined to organisations 'exclusive' in their membership *composition*.<sup>34</sup> Such arguments, as was notoriously the case with Michels, are often marked by an extreme fatalism. Yet even if 'iron laws' are rejected as simplistic and exaggerated, it is difficult to deny that such writings identify genuine *tendencies* within organisational politics: the more extensive and differentiated the interests encompassed within a unit of organisation, the less the likelihood of constituting a cohesive collective actor; hence the

greater the obstacles to rank-and-file initiative, or even effective leadership accountability to the membership.

Yet the cohesion which stems from a common particularistic situation and interest is frequently the obverse face of sectionalism and parochialism. Internal unity founded on *differentiation* from the wider working class can well generate disunity and division in external relations. Moreover, what can be achieved through local or sectional struggle is constrained by the broader framework of productive relations; even militant particularism is **politically accommodative**.<sup>35</sup> Hence the traditional definition of the socialist objective as the integration and harmonisation of workers' diverse experiences and aspirations to form a united class struggle. Throughout the history of modern working-class organisation, then, can be seen a constant counterpoint between the goals of **rank-and-file** autonomy and self-activity, as against disciplined and cohesive mass action. Notions of 'democratic centralism' have at times been posed as the resolution of this contradiction; but their meaning in practice has never been clear.

The power of localism is a universal theme in accounts of mining trade unionism. Men herded together and hardened in the pits were made to feel the oneness of their interests, and they gave it full expression in a **marvellous and very elaborate** system of fraternities, mutual aid, solidarity and **co-operation**.<sup>36</sup> **Collective** organisation among miners has always been rooted in the organic cohesiveness of the colliery; formal trade unionism at the level of the whole coalfield and beyond has been a more artificial and hence more vulnerable construct. Without this potent local collectivism, mining unionism could not have displayed its amazing resilience; yet the divergence of local interests has been a constant obstacle to national unity. Throughout the history of trade unionism in the coalfields, failure to respect sufficiently the strength of local claims to self-determination has led to fractures and secessions. The NUM itself is only a partial transformation of the explicit federalism on which national organisation was based for over half a century before 1944. It remains, in Allen's words, 'a *de facto* federation of semi-autonomous county unions disguised as areas of a national **union**'.<sup>37</sup>

Patterns of struggle—despite dramatic instances of massive national confrontation—have for the most part reflected and reinforced a predominant localism. The exceptional level of strike activity in the 1940s and 1950s—at one point, mining accounted for three-quarters of all stoppages recorded in Britain—was the product of a multiplicity of small and usually short-lived actions, largely connected with the piecework payment system. Will Paynter, perhaps the major architect of the national day-wage system of the 1960s, denounced the divisive effects of piecework and was no less critical of the associated tradition of small-scale unofficial **militancy**.<sup>38</sup> His arguments were out of tune with the new mood of rank-and-file assertiveness; the call to respect the union's national

integrity read like a simple affirmation of the authority of a national leadership committed to a 'constructive' partnership with the NCB. The left-wing advance within the NUM during the 1970s commenced, necessarily, with challenges which were fragmented, partial and unofficial. Without the anti-leadership eruption of 1969 and 1970 as a foundation, the successful national movements of 1972 and 1974 would surely have been impossible. More fundamentally still, the miners' historic struggle to control the conditions of their work—a struggle necessarily rooted in the particularities of each separate pit and seam—may be seen as the elemental force from which more generalised assertions of collective interest and aspiration are derived.

Yet in retrospect it is clear that Paynter expressed one element in the contradictory relationship of unity and discipline, autonomy and division. The circumstances which generated the broad-based struggles of the early 1970s proved exceptional. The production bonus system, the final achievement of the manoeuvrings of the embattled right-wing leadership, recreated the scope for decentralisation and fragmentation. From the mid-1970s the number of small, short strikes in mining rose rapidly (against the trend in most other industries); while the historic regional contrasts in geology were once more translated into sharp divergences in conditions of **employment**.<sup>39</sup> The widening gap in material circumstances was clearly expressed in NUM politics. In February 1974, when every area of the union had voted for the **strike**,<sup>40</sup> Nottinghamshire had registered 77 per cent support as against 90 per cent in Yorkshire; in March 1983 the respective percentages were 19 and 64.

'Area by area will decide, and in my opinion it will have a domino effect': the strategy enunciated by McGahey at the outset of the strike<sup>41</sup> recalls the means by which action was spread in 1969 and 1970. But then the context was a growing homogeneity of discontent, justifying optimism that the example of militants in one area would inspire members elsewhere; while in 1984 the dominant motivation was essentially pessimistic: since the more favoured areas would never vote in favour of strike action, the initiative must be taken without them. Yet in a struggle which became 'more about community than **class**',<sup>42</sup> the consequence was to reinforce the divisive effects of localism. The refusal of a ballot appears here in another guise: 'it implicitly cut across the long-established principle of national unity, national decisions and national **action**'.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, the importance of a ballot lies not in its questionable virtue in enfranchising miners as individuals, but rather in its force as a symbol of national integration, a ritual affirmation of unity of purpose. In the event, action under rule 41 evolved precisely as the rule prescribes: a series of area stoppages conducted largely autonomously and following very different rhythms in the various coalfields. Faced with a ruthless adversary exceptionally well prepared for battle, the NUM conducted an **unco-ordinated** campaign

which exposed and accentuated its internal divisions.



The 'domino' tactic of escalating area action bears directly on the role of force and consent in the dispute. How was the strike to be spread from one coalfield to another? The issue of picketing, discussed previously in terms of the confrontation with state power and the management of publicity, is again the central question. From the first days of the dispute there was a powerful rank-and-file initiative to deploy flying pickets: in Scotland and South Wales, from striking pits to those initially holding back; in South Yorkshire, into the neighbouring counties of Lancashire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. The outcome was of course very different: almost total closure of the Welsh and Scottish coalfields, but only limited support in the Midlands.

To some extent the explanation is straightforward. South Wales and Scotland were 'marginal' coalfields highly vulnerable to future closure programmes; initial reluctance to join the strike was in part a consequence of the earlier failures of other areas to support them when they were fighting closures. The central coalfields, by contrast, were far more secure. In addition, localism doubtless had some influence: colliers were more likely to respond favourably to pickets from their own area than to 'foreigners'. Yet the question then arises: what is the function of a picket which those picketed are not predisposed to respect? On this point, comment on and during the strike is often equivocal. Callinicos and Simons, whose sole criticism of the strategy of mass picketing is that it was pursued with insufficient vigour, are contemptuous of those—such as Notts general secretary Henry Richardson—who questioned the use of flying pickets. 'It never dawned on him that rank-and-file Yorkshire miners might make better ambassadors in Nottinghamshire than full-time officials. . . . If the Nottinghamshire area council had called on its branches to hold canteen meetings where flying pickets could put their case, the outcome of the vote [i.e. the local Notts ballot] could have been very different.'<sup>44</sup> The use of pickets as 'ambassadors' was indeed pioneered by the South Wales area in its campaign against closures the previous year, when delegates were sent to every colliery in Britain. But the question of numbers is of qualitative significance. Ambassadors by the dozen are perhaps conceivable; in hundreds strains credulity.

To present the issue starkly: what happens if persuasion fails? Admit defeat, or employ more forceful methods? With mass picketing, the force of argument can readily become the argument of force. Was this intended from the outset? Those who regarded Notts as hopelessly corrupted by latter-day Spencerism presumably set little faith in the dispatch of ambassadors to canteen meetings. On this view, the central coalfields were

deaf to persuasion and would join the strike only if physically prevented from working. Were the Notts miners in fact a hopeless case? And if so, was force an appropriate alternative to persuasion?

The solid support from Nottinghamshire for the strikes of **1972** and **1974** clearly owed much to the particular constraints which the new standard pay rates imposed on an area with earnings traditionally well above the national average; the area incentive scheme detached economic militancy from the broader community of interest within the NUM. Yet local orientations in the past decade have proved deeply contradictory. On the one side can be seen the votes in the ballots of **1982** and **1983**, when support for strike action was less than half the national average; or the Tory successes in the **1977** Sutton-in-Ashfield by-election, and in **1983** in the new Sherwood constituency with its ten collieries. But against this can be set the evidence of militancy which transcends sectional economism: notably the campaign to reduce the retirement age to 55, if necessary through a national strike. There was extensive evidence of advances by the left in this traditionally right-wing area, with election successes for lodge officials and area executive positions, a trend sustained by the victory of Henry Richardson as broad left candidate for area secretary in **1982**.

Favoured by geology and economics, the county had less than any other to fear from **MacGregor's** butchery. To persuade the local miners that government policies ultimately affected their own interests, and that resistance could prove effective, would have been an immense task. Nevertheless, at the outset of the dispute 'the coalfield was split and incredibly volatile'.<sup>45</sup> Picket-line confrontations helped resolve the contradictory politics of Notts miners towards an outcome which fatally divided the whole strike movement. 'Scenes of violence—often more akin to football "aggro" than political violence—turned mining communities against the strike. . . Locals came out to bait the pickets and cheer their men into work. Nottinghamshire miners' leaders. . . are convinced that they could have close to a majority in their area for a strike, but for the violence depicted on TV.'<sup>46</sup> The rhetoric of 'scabs' and 'bastards', while a totally understandable reaction to those who refused to join the strike (and who in many cases were soon to seek deliberately to provoke the pickets), conveyed the message that dialogue was useless. The escalation of antagonism which resulted was to create a radical, and perhaps irreconcilable polarisation within the union. One consequence in **Nottinghamshire** was a 'rank-and-file revolt' in which incumbents were displaced by 'working miners' at branch, area council and full-time officer level. After the progress achieved in the previous decade, the left has been eclipsed—perhaps for a generation.

Whether different tactics by the strikers might have won the consent of the majority of Notts strikers is unanswerable. Whether failing this

consent it was appropriate to seek to close down the coalfield by force of numbers raises different issues which have historically been the focus of controversy among socialists. At the most general level: it is common to define the normal condition of capitalist society as a war between classes, and military metaphors abound in the rhetoric of the left. Most schools of socialism have been anti-militarist as regards relations between states, but anti-pacifist in domestic politics. The dominant assumption has always been that no ruling class will abandon power willingly: oppressive social relations must be overthrown, and in the process there may well be casualties. Yet most socialists have refused to glorify violence, and have been suspicious of the dehumanising logic that coolly insists that 'you cannot make omelettes without breaking eggs'. Rosa Luxemburg's attitude to revolutionary violence is exemplary: 'a whole world has to be overturned, but any tear that could have been avoided is an **accusation**'.<sup>47</sup> Hence the familiar maxim of British socialists a century ago: 'peacefully if we may, forcibly if we must'.

Yet socialist discussion of violence has primarily concerned the revolutionary overthrow of the established order and its defenders, and the treatment of reactionary social strata within a post-revolutionary society. Responses to the institutionalised violence inherent in the routine social relations of 'stable' capitalist societies involve far more problematic issues. Thus terrorism as a political tactic is in general unacceptable: a method which short-circuits the task of winning mass support for resistance. Apart from very exceptional circumstances (an occupying regime, or a ruling class perceived in similar terms), random violence by a dedicated minority alienates the majority of the population and allows the authorities to harness their support for a defence of the social order. **Gramsci's** distinction between a war of manoeuvre and war of position is obviously relevant here: under 'normal' conditions there exists a dense network of (materially based) ideological linkages between the **working class** and the institutions of bourgeois society. To unravel this network requires a delicate, protracted, but if successful cumulative effort. By contrast, an insensitive challenge to key principles of the taken-for-granted social relations of capitalist society will prove self-defeating. Thus 'picket-line violence' sewed as a potent mechanism for the ideological **marginalisation** of striking miners.

The classic socialist debates on violence refer to conflicts between, not within classes. Yet within the working class there exists a multiplicity of differentiations of function and condition, from which stem divisions of interest which inevitably affect labour action. The proletariat can be empirically constituted as a class only at the moment when it abolishes the circumstances of its oppression: the notion of class unity is otherwise an abstraction from an array of divergent particularities which are often appraised subjectively in antagonistic form. What then determines the

boundaries of potential common struggle? What groups can in principle be won to solidarity, at least over certain issues, and which must be regarded as incorrigibly hostile? And what formulation of issues and choice of tactics will most probably attract rather than repel possible allies?

These questions set the controversy over mass picketing in a broader context. Unless fellow-workers are regarded as by some means open to reasoning and conviction, the very notion of class politics is futile. Aggressive physical confrontation between worker and worker is the frustrated (and often altogether understandable) symptom of an argument which is already lost. Its effect may be to consolidate one's own forces but to confirm those confronted in their role as enemy; while for those not engaged in the immediate conflict, the merits of the violence itself rather than the precipitating issues will dominate reactions. Several commentators have remarked on the paradox that while the resistance at **Greenham Common** inspired many of the women whose collective support and initiative were vital for the endurance of the strike, the principles of the peace movement had little resonance in the conduct of the pickets. Beatrix Campbell explored the contrast:

Inescapably the sight of the picketlines echoes the sight of blockades at **Greenham Common**. Women and men who've joined picketlines at pits and depots have received none of the training in non-violent direct action which the peace movement demands to discover its members' fears and strengths, to discover the best way of coping with violence. Sit down, comes the advice. Hold on to each other. Step back, consider how you feel, how the land lies, how the balance of forces is matching up. Make sure you can see what's going on and that you can handle what's going on. Experience shows the unnerving futility of a big crowd lurching up to the gates, pushing and shoving with the police. Today they always win. The worst thing you can do is to stay on your feet: that way you can't see anything and you are at your most unstable.

Some men have instinctively resisted speculation on the sort of tactics the miners might borrow from **Greenham Common**. Some are mesmerised by the idea, but interject with the proviso: 'but would miners lie down, could they?' It's as if lying down is something inherently threatening to the virility of class warriors. Is this more important than the recognition that the infantry charging the cavalry from its trench simply leads to broken heads?<sup>48</sup>

Subsequently, Campbell emphasised the need to distinguish illegality from violence: non-violent law-breaking is central to the **Greenham women's action**.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, under recent Tory laws most non-aggressive forms of picketing would represent unlawful action: but their perception by those picketed and by the broader working class might be very different. Ultimately, perhaps, the use of force may be inescapable: the closed shop, for example, is necessarily a coercive institution. But force deployed as a substitute rather than a complement for consent is always alienating. It is clear that the left must explore far more intensively than in the past

the contradictions inherent in the traditional macho notions of 'industrial muscle', and the possibility for learning from theories of non-violent resistance. What forms of industrial action are best suited to winning the consent of those whose support is ultimately essential for success? Pursued seriously, the necessary debate will be long and painful.



There will be many for whom all such arguments are beside the point.

Models of trade union behaviour which do not account for the **rank** and file are bound to mirror the tabloid obsession with leaderships. . . Nationally, the NUM found its hand forced by the Yorkshire area, which itself voted for the strike against the advice of its full-time officers. . . For the Yorkshire miners, pit closures were never an issue for balloting. 'We're not letting those bastards in Notts vote our men out of a job.' . . . Similarly with the picketing. The Yorkshire area executive decided on a policy of picketing only their own pits, with only six men to a picket. But the miners surged over the borders into Notts. I don't suppose for the minute that, if **Scargill** and Heathfield had stood in the middle of the A1, the Doncaster miners would have stopped trying to get into **Nottinghamshire**.<sup>50</sup>

All this is true, but the issue of leadership cannot be simply dismissed on that account.

The left has long been somewhat schizoid about leadership. With good reason: as that brilliant polemic *The Miners' Next Step* so powerfully demonstrated, there is indeed a 'bad side' to leadership. Leaders often develop vested interests, adopt an 'official' viewpoint with conservative connotations, substitute their own personal expertise for the collective initiative of the membership. Yet few socialists endorse the thoroughgoing rejection of leadership expressed by the South Wales militants in 1912. Ironically, their successors who castigated the failings of 'trade union bureaucrats' commonly insisted on the elite role of the revolutionary vanguard party. Both elements in this contradictory amalgam have tended to mystify the empirical working class: union officialdom persistently betraying a membership which is in essence combative and class-conscious; the party constantly pursuing the correct initiative to release the masses' revolutionary zeal.

Any adequate conception of leadership must focus not primarily on leaders as such—whether depicted as reactionary bureaucrats or exemplary revolutionaries—but on the *relationships* between leaders and members. A recent discussion of strike strategy expresses this point with clarity:

*Above all, the successful strategist has to display qualities of leadership.* The job of *mobilising, developing* and *directing* the power necessary to win strikes lies first of all with the obvious natural leaders, the shop stewards and the full-time

officers. Workers sometimes shy away from the idea of leadership. It often suggests the idea of generals ordering soldiers about in an army. Trade unions are not like that. But in any trade union at any time the experience of different people is different. The shop stewards should, on the whole, by the very fact that they have taken on the job, be more committed to the goals of the union than many members. They will have been more involved in union issues and negotiations. Whilst they must always do their best to involve the membership they should have more far-sighted and informed views. Their greater experience and knowledge must be put at the disposal of the members. The same goes even more for full-time officers.

This is not to say that the membership should automatically accept and act on the views of their representatives. Far from it. In the end, the members and not their representatives must make the decisions. Members will then be able to make up their own minds with greater awareness and understanding of the issues. In other words, *what we need in unions is democratic leadership*, and that means building up a good two-way relationship with members over time, trying to involve them in all decisions, trying to get their participation in union matters, arguing and discussing with them, trying to build up new activists, but remembering always that the members are the **union**.<sup>51</sup>

Leadership involves the ability to assess the constantly changing balance of forces, and to evaluate the likely outcome of different initiatives and responses. It may entail arguing for militant action when the members are reluctant, or urging caution when they are militant. It requires an ability to end strikes as well as to begin them. And not least it depends on the constant exchange of information and argument without which reasoned and democratic collective decisions are impossible.

We are not of those who place implicit reliance upon leadership and who consider that the sole duty of the rank and file is blindly to trust that leadership, but at the same time we must emphasise that any group of trade union leaders withdrawn from industry, given the opportunity to study the detailed problems with which their membership is faced, should have the courage to **lead**.<sup>52</sup> Arthur Horner's remarks in the aftermath of the General **Strike** remain applicable today. One comment on the leadership of the 1984-85 strike rejects the suggestion 'that the miners were badly led. Certainly, mistakes were made. But the weaknesses complained of **are** inseparable from the strike's strength, and from the **fidelity** of the leaders to the sentiment of the lodges and **villages**'.<sup>53</sup> But if the rank and file should not blindly trust their leaders, nor should the same failing operate in reverse. **Another** of Arthur Horner's comments is **opposite**. Contrasting the quiet reception of his own speeches to the enthusiasm evoked by Arthur Cook, he relates that Cook 'would electrify the meeting. They would applaud and nod their heads in agreement when he said the most obvious things. For a long time I was puzzled, and then one night I realized why it was. I was speaking to the meeting. Cook was speaking for the meeting. He was expressing the thoughts of his audience, I was trying to **persuade** them. He was the burning expression of their anger at the iniquities which they were **suffering**'.<sup>54</sup>

Homer did not present this assessment as a criticism of Cook. Nevertheless, the issue could have been raised in 1926: did leadership require the telling of uncomfortable truths, a realistic appraisal of the balance of forces, the advocacy of tactical retreat rather than protracted grinding defeat? Certainly such questions are relevant to an assessment of 1984–85. The media have been rightly attacked for their personalisation of what was often termed 'Scargill's strike'. Nevertheless, it is clear that the NUM President exerts a personal charisma over many rank-and-file members, particularly in Yorkshire; and that the relationship displays some features of a personality cult. And a style of oratory reminiscent of Arthur Cook—telling the audience what they want to hear—reinforces this intense popular appeal. Yet is populism enough? In faithfully expressing the feelings of the young, militant activists—'reared in a folk culture that mythologised the 1970s strikes'<sup>55</sup>—was the task of strategic leadership abdicated? To have proposed different tactics to those spontaneously initiated by the rank and file, to have recommended terms falling short of the miners' justifiable demands, would have invited unpopularity and perhaps rejection. But had the risk been taken, might the outcome have been very different?

The experience of the strike brings to the fore the fundamental issue of the nature of trade union democracy. What is the role of leadership? How can the dangers of elitism and manipulation be avoided, without succumbing to mere subservience to the short-term enthusiasms of the most vocal sections of the membership? How can the inevitable unevenness of function and experience be fused within a collective relationship in which all contribute to a common initiative? There are no simple answers; but in its present embattled state, the labour movement cannot afford to evade the questions.

#### NOTES

1. Striking miner quoted in Huw Beynon, ed., *Digging Deeper*, Verso, 1985, p. 7.
2. George Bolton (Vice-President, Scottish Area NUM and Communist Party chair) in 'The Miners' Strike', *Marxism Today*, April 1985, p. 24. This comment contrasts with Bolton's argument in an earlier round-table discussion: 'while we could have held a ballot during the strike, what would that have achieved, it wouldn't have solved the problem, it wouldn't have stopped the pic closure programme'.
3. Mick McGahey quoted in *The Times*, 7 March 1984. According to Kim Howells, this expression was widely used in South Wales during the previous year.
4. V.L. Allen, *The Militancy of British Miners*, Moor Press, 1981, p. 302.
5. Cf. Jonathan Winterton and John Rentoul, 'Confronting the New Technology', *New Statesman*, 20 January 1984.
6. 'Only a Ballot Can Pave the Way for a Miners' Victory', *Guardian*, 16 September 1984; 'What Scargill Means', *New Society*, 17 January 1985.
7. For an elaboration of this argument see Peter Fairbrother, *All Those in Favour*,

Pluto, 1984.

8. It is a familiar point that 'representative parliamentary democracy' was originally advocated as a *curb* on popular political control by that arch-conservative Edmund Burke.
9. R. Page Amot, *The Miners: a History of the MFGB 1889-1910*, Allen and Unwin, 1949, p. 374 and *The Miners: Years of Struggle*, 1953, pp. 176-7; P.S. Bagwell, 'The Triple Industrial Alliance, 1913-1922' in Asa Briggs and John Saville, eds., *Essays in Labour History 1886-1923*, Macmillan, 1971. Ironically it was the Railwaymen under the right-wing leadership of Jimmy Thomas who most strongly opposed the ballot principle.
10. By another irony it was the most prominent communist activist in the Miners' Federation, Arthur Homer, who insisted in the period of 'class against class' that revolutionary trade unionists must appreciate the depth of ordinary members' respect for *rulebook* prescriptions. For Party leaders in the early 1930s, 'Hornerism' was a more threatening deviation than Trotskyism.
11. Michael Crick, *Scargill and the Miners*, Penguin, 1985 edn., p. 108.
12. Ben Fine, 'The Future of British Coal', *Capital and Class*, 23, Summer 1984, p. 80.
13. Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons, *The Great Strike*, Socialist Worker, 1985, p. 78.
14. For a detailed analysis see Peggy Kahn, Norman Lewis, Rowland Livock and Paul Wiles, *Picketing*, Routledge, 1983.
15. Arthur Scargill, 'The New Unionism', *New Left Review*, 72, July-August 1975, p. 10.
16. The study by Kahn (at the time a close associate of Scargill) and her colleagues made this clear in advance of the strike.
17. 'Last Stand or Orderly Retreat', 23 March 1984, p. 9.
18. *Great Strike*, p. 53.
19. Andrew Gamble, 'This Lady's Not For Turning', *Marxism Today*, June 1984, pp. 13-4. The 'right to work', one notes, applies to non-strikers, not those unemployed or threatened with the dole.
20. Mick Johnson, *New Statesman*, 8 June 1984.
21. Arthur Scargill, *Sunday Times*, 11 March 1984.
22. Allen, *Militancy*, p. 169.
23. Following the June 1974 *Plan for Coal*—essentially an outline scenario—a tripartite study by the NCB, NUM and Department of Energy produced two reports. The final document argued that with increased output targets 'the need to close pits on economic grounds should be much reduced', but continued that 'inevitably some pits will have to close as their useful economic reserves of coal are depleted'. The whole controversy over 'what the *Plan for Coal* really meant' was arguably an unproductive diversion throughout the strike.
24. See in particular the exchange in the *Guardian* between Patrick Wintour (20 May 1985), Nell Myers (3 June 1985) and John Torode (11 June 1985).
25. Andrew Glyn, *The Economic Case Against Pit Closures*, NUM, 1984.
26. E.g. George Kerevan and Richard Saville, *The Case for Deep-Mined Coal in Scotland*, mimeo, 1985.
27. Tony Berry, Teresa Capps, David Cooper, Trevor Hopper and Tony Lowe, 'NCB Accounts: A Mine of Mis-Information?', *Accountancy*, January 1985.
28. In practice, 'economic' and 'non-economic' factors may be hard to disentangle—as, for example, in identifying when 'exhaustion' is reached.
29. 'A Plan for Disaster', *New Society*, 7 March 1985.
30. 'What was on offer was by any standards a remarkable breakthrough against one of the most rigid alliances of government and management since the 1926

General Strike. If Arthur Scargill had grabbed a deal then, and had put it to a ballot of his members, it is difficult to see how Mrs Thatcher could have sold the outcome to her supporters as anything less than a damaging retreat' (Ian Aitken, *Guardian*, 16 November 1984).

31. Victor Keegan, *Guardian*, 30 June 1984.
32. *Guardian*, 13 February 1985.
33. Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, Hearsts, 1915.
34. H.A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy*, Allen and Unwin, 1962.
35. This point has been regularly made in historians' discussions of 'Labourism', and is central to Huw Beynon's identification of 'factory consciousness' as the **over-riding** basis of shop steward militancy (*Working for Ford*, Penguin, 1984 edn.).
36. F. Zweig, *Men in the Pits*, Gollancz, 1948, p. 163.
37. *Militancy*, p. 283.
38. *British Trade Unions and the Problem of Change*, Allen and Unwin, 1970.
39. Before the overtime ban, the average weekly bonus in the highest-paid areas was around **£100**, four times the level in the lowest-paid. Variations between individual pits were even greater.
40. Only the colliery officials recorded a majority against (**61** per cent); the lowest support in a geographical area was Leicestershire's **62** per cent.
41. *The Times*, 7 March 1984.
42. Raphael Samuel, 'Friends and Outsiders', *New Statesman*, 11 January 1985, p. 15.
43. Hywel Francis, 'NUM United: a Team in Disarray', *Marxism Today*, April 1985, p. 30.
44. *Great Strike*, p. 49.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
46. Walter Pond, 'Last Stand or Orderly Retreat', *New Statesman*, 23 March 1984. One may note that even despite the polarisation against the strike, it still obtained **26** per cent support in the area ballot—significantly above the figure a year before. And **Notts** miners respected the national overtime ban to the end of the strike.
47. Quoted in Tony Cliff, *Rosa Luxemburg*, IS, 1959, p. 26.
48. 'The Other Miners' Strike', *New Statesman*, 27 July 1984, p. 10.
49. 'Politics Old and New', *New Statesman*, 8 March 1985.
50. John Field, 'Labour's **Dunkirk**', *New Socialist*, April 1985, p. 12.
51. John McIlroy, *Strike!*, Pluto, 1984, p. 9.
52. Arthur Homer, *Communism and Coal*, CPGB, 1928, p. 214.
53. Raphael Samuel, Gareth Stedman Jones and Stuart Weir, 'Thatcher's Moscow', *New Socialist*, April 1985, p. 3.
54. *Incorrigible Rebel*, MacGibbon and Kee, 1960, p. 72.
55. Field, 'Labour's Dunkirk', p. 13.