



UNITY

Printed & Published by the Irish Communist Party

For Peace, Independence and Socialism

Duram Miners Gala

13.07.24

Salute to the Miners

By Ernest Walker

THIS was a strike like no other where the mass forces of the state were unleashed against the most powerful trade union in Britain.

These state forces which included MI5 were unrelenting in their quest to destroy the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the mining industry and the mining communities.

What is extremely infuriating is that the strike could have been won indeed Lord Marshal of the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) warned Margaret Thatcher as early as the Autumn of 1984 that the government could lose the strike due to low coal stocks at power stations.

There were some in the trade union and labour movement who were less than enthusiastic in supporting the miners.

The Enemy within

The book written by Seamus Milne, *The Enemy Within* goes as far as naming some as police spies or even MI5 agents. MI5 even had people inside the NUM in particular the role of the chief executive officer of the union, Roger Windsor, is detailed in the book.

We have to go back to the 1972 strike where victory was clinched when the gates of the Saltley coke depot in Birmingham were closed.

The NUM where Arthur Scargill started to play a prominent role was assisted by the support of 10,000 striking engineering workers.

Two years later the dispute of 1974 led to the defeat of the Heath government who went to the country on the slogan *Who Governs Britain*. And was subsequently told *Not You*.

This is when Margaret Thatcher also became more prominent. She was one of only two cabinet ministers in the Heath Government who opposed the calling of a general election. Ironically Heath's defeat led to her becoming the leader of the party in 1975, International Year for Women, and becoming prime minister in 1979.

Her biographer, Hugo Young wrote, that "*no name was scarred more deeply on the Conservative soul than that of the NUM.*"

She herself suffered a defeat at the hands of the NUM in 1981 when she backed down in the face of spontaneous strikes across the coal fields in opposition to the threat of large-scale pit closures.

Peter Walker who was Energy Secretary during the 1984-1985 strike said that the 1981 climb-down was 'scorched' on Thatcher's mind.

However, the Tories in the form of Nicholas Ridley, a right-wing MP and Thatcher ally, were busy draw-

ing plans to take the miners on.

He assured Thatcher that a strike could be defeated.

What was needed was a build-up of coal stocks and imports and significantly the encouragement of non-union road hauliers.

It is claimed that he got this idea from Chile where these elements undermined the Allende government.

He also suggested the rapid introduction of dual coal-oil firing at all power stations, the withdrawal of social security benefits from striker's families and finally the creation of a large, mobile squad of police.

An unmistakable signal that the Tory government meant business was when they recruited union-busting American industrialist Ian McGregor to the National Coal Board ((NCB).

By this time the NUM had imposed an overtime ban in October 1983 over pay and closures which was designed to reduce stock piles in preparation for the expected showdown.





KEEP THE **PITS** OPEN
SHUT DOWN THE **GOVT.**

-The 40th anniversary of the 1984-85 of the miners' strike in Britain

Cortonwood

That showdown came when the NCB decided to close Cortonwood Colliery in South Yorkshire on purely financial grounds and without consultation and then six days later giving notice of the closure of twenty more pits with the loss of 20,000 jobs.

The overtime ban was certainly having its effect as that is when the CEBG privately told the government, it emerged years later, that the ban was cutting deep into



**May Day Belfast 1985:
Scottish Wives banner :
Margaret Bruton on the right.**

he coal stocks.

They also suggested that a 12-week strike would put the country's lights out.

Even before the Cortonwood announcement pit-level management were being provocative and local disputes were spreading notably at Polomaise colliery in Scotland which was already on strike over the threat of closure.

Within a fortnight 80 percent of miners were on strike most of whom would remain on strike for 12 months.

This made a mockery of those who for selfish reasons were calling for a national ballot.

ONE of the Yorkshire miner's leaders, Jack Taylor, said his members would 'murder him' if he asked them to vote on what they were already doing. NUM General Secretary Peter Heathfield, stated that the national ballot idea was being promoted as a *veto to prevent people in other areas defending their jobs.*

The call was being made in the main from the Nottinghamshire area where the NCB had guaranteed them a long term future.

Contrary to popular opinion not all Nottinghamshire miners worked during the dispute, quite, a number stayed loyal to the NUM.

Their story is told in a book *Nottinghamshire Miners Do Strike*, by one of those involved, Keith Stanley.

It is a piece of irony that in 1977 the NCB wanted to re-introduce incentive payments that would favour miners at higher productivity pits such as those in Nottinghamshire.

Three ballots took place on the issue, three times the concept was rejected.

However, that did not stop the old Nottinghamshire NUM from negotiating local deals so ignoring three national ballots.

This outfit, which later formed the core of the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) had the cheek then in 1984 to call for a national ballot.

At its first conference the UDM invited Tory MP Micheal Heseltine to be the guest speaker. Their

class collaboration did not bear any fruit as there are no pits left in Nottinghamshire and the UDM has ceased to exist.

In 2004 it was revealed that Neil Greatrex who held the position of president and general secretary was paid £100,250 whilst the vice president David Stevens was paid £91,313.

This on a membership of 1431. In 2012 Greatrex, who died in 2019, was sentenced to four years in prison for defrauding a fund of £150,000 designed for sick miners.

The UDM was dissolved in 2022. At the end of the day the strike could have been won and whilst the miners had enormous support amongst ordinary working people they were faced with massive forces of the state.

There were elements amongst the trade union and labour movement whose dislike of the NUM leadership of Arthur Scargill, Peter Heathfield and Mick McGahey was such that I am convinced they would see them and the NUM defeated.

A victory for the miners would have changed the political landscape in Britain and might have seen the end of Thatcher.

It could also have side-lined some of the spineless so-called leaders in the movement who were running scared of the situation.

The Snowman.

One unforgettable incident took place during the winter of 1984 when pickets built a snowman at the end of the lane leading up to their pit. Chief Superintendent Nesbitt of the South Yorkshire Police demanded the pickets demolish it. They refused so he jumped into his new Range Rover and drove it at the snowman.

Unfortunately for him the pickets failed to tell him that it was built around a concrete bollard. The vehi-

Nott's miners do strike

cle was damaged and so was his pride.

Its not football!

On August 25th 1985 Sheffield Wednesday, newly promoted to the old 1st division, opened their account when they were pitted against Nottingham Forest at Hillsborough. As Forest players took to the pitch they were met with a crescendo of SCAB, SCAB, SCAB! It must have unsettled them as Wednesday won

3-1. Years later I met a striking miner from Doncaster who was a Forest supporter and was at the match. He wasn't very pleased at being called a scab. Anyway we had a laugh about it and I duly apologised on behalf of 30.000 Owls supporters.

Footnotes:

Much more under the surface

This article is just the tip of the iceberg, people need to read about the communities how they fought back and how they were destroyed, and to know about the Women Against Pit closures.

Not forgetting the campaign for Orgreave-still ongoing or the solidarity that trade unionists in Ireland, played north and south that is also another story.

Ernest Walker

Worked in the engineering industry at Firth Brown Tools in Sheffield, he was made redundant in 1984, when the engineering industry began to close down.

He took part in supporting the strikers at rallies, on the picket lines and speaking at meetings. Ernest was also the Lay President of the AEU in Sheffield at the time of the strike.

In 1988 he came to live in Belfast where he got a job at Hughes Christenson engineering firm in east Belfast (now closed down) and was a shop steward there until he retired, from work but not politics!



Free Free Palestine



Páirtí Cumannach Éireann-Irish Communist Party sends greetings of solidarity to the Durham Miners Gala.

The banners of unions assemble in the sun.

Time for change-end genocide in Palestine

Spend money on the NHS-not weapons for war



Defend Irish neutrality

And our victorious rallying cry-Shall be we want the earth!-

JamesConnolly



MADGE DAVISON MEMORIAL LECTURE

**GUEST SPEAKER BRIAN CAMPFIELD:
BETTY SINCLAIR A LIFE OF WORKING CLASS REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE**



Betty Sinclair and Madge Davison at the May Day march 1971 Cromac Square: photo by Bill Kirk

SATURDAY 3RD AUGUST 2024 / 14.00PM -16.15PM

**VENUE: CONWAY MILL,
5 - 7 CONWAY ST, OFF THE FALLS ROAD
BELFAST, BT13 2DE**

