

Vic Allen

# The Miners on the Move

**Even the Thatcher government has bowed before the miners. But it has not always been the same. Until the 70s, the miners were on the defensive. So what has changed?**



During the last decade the National Union of Mineworkers has established itself as the most politically potent union in Britain. This is not because its industrial power is greater than any other union. Electrical power workers could have a more immediate impact upon power supplies than miners but they are not high in the ratings. Water workers or gas supply workers could cause immediate industrial and social disruption if they exercised their collective power but neither of these groups is influential either in the trade union movement or the wider political scene. The explanation lies partly, of course, in the actual industrial power miners wield but also in the determination with which they collectively use their industrial strength and in the solidarity which their actions evoke from other groups of workers.

The influence of miners stems also from the perception which the government, political parties and other unions have of them. This perception is rooted in the actual behaviour of miners but it has an element of mythology about it. The miners struck with frightening determination in 1972 against all odds but that was their first national official strike since 1926 when they were painfully defeated. And although their propensity to strike had been the highest amongst industrial workers in Britain that was no longer the case. In 1956 as many as 78.4% of all strikes in Great Britain occurred in min-

ing but by 1970 this figure had fallen to 41%. The post First World War history of miners was characterised by the extraordinary solidarity in 1926 but even more by fractured unity, industrial defeat, collaboration with private employers, the National Coal Board and governments, and demoralisation following the dramatic contraction of the industry in the 1960s which reduced the numbers of miners from more than 700,000 in 1956 to 296,000 in 1970. There was little in this history to support the mythology about miners' solidarity. Even when their propensity to strike was at its height their strikes were largely confined to single collieries and were over parochial wage issues.

## A new paranoia

Notwithstanding the reality of miners' experiences the image of a powerful collective presence persisted. There was always something awe-inspiring about miners' actions. Then in 1972 the myth came to life when the miners took the government on in a wages confrontation and shattered its n-1 incomes policy in a seven week strike.

There were many examples following 1972 of the sensitivity of governments to the changing collective mood of miners. The government of Mr Edward Heath which had conceded defeat in 1972 reacted with virtual hysteria in November 1973 when the NUM imposed an overtime ban. A state of emergency was declared the day following the

imposition of the ban and a three day working week was enforced by law creating industrial chaos and social consequences far greater than a strike could have done. There was no objective basis for such a reaction for, after all, the miners had simply decided to work a normal week. The strike in 1974, which followed yet another overtime ban and propelled the Prime Minister into a general election which he lost to the Labour Party, consolidated the fear which governments had of the miners. The Social Contract was designed by the 1974 Labour government to contain the miners' wage demands; wage incentive schemes were re-introduced in 1978 as a means of breaking the miners' unity. Then, in February, 1981, the present Conservative government responded to a partial, unofficial miners' strike against pit closures by agreeing to meet the strikers' demands. This response contained all the elements of hysteria which had marked Heath's behaviour in 1973. It was unexpected, dramatic, an unashamed reversal of policy for the benefit of miners only. It was as if Mrs Thatcher had suddenly recognized the route which Mr Heath had followed in 1974.

## A further confrontation?

The apprehension with which governments have viewed confrontation with miners makes the present developing confrontation difficult to understand. The government could be excused for not anticipating the pit closure strike last February because miners had given no sign of militancy over that issue. Indeed the evidence pointed towards the NUM being compliant. But during the autumn of 1981 the government and miners snowballed into confrontation position. At any time during October and November the parties could have stopped, dusted themselves down and sorted out their differences. The miners were demanding a minimum wage of £100 a week, amounting to a 25% wage increase compared with the 4% public sector norm insisted on by the government. Between those two limits there was undoubtedly a price at which confrontation could have been dissipated.

Both the government and National Coal Board relied on the NUM president, Joe Gormley, to handle the issue in their interest. Gormley made it clear that he thought the wage claim was excessive and that he did not intend to leave office as he came in, with a major strike on his hands. His timing of the negotiations and his handling of the union's National Executive Committee were vital, therefore, in this 'avoidance of confrontation' process.

It is often believed that there is a pecking

order in the annual struggle for wage increases. Namely, that the first major union to make its demand sets a ceiling for the remaining claims. If the NUM were prompt in submitting its claim and anxious for a settlement by its customary date of 1 November then it would be likely to be a 'price-leader'. Gormley did not want the miners to make the pace. It so happened that the British Leyland workers had submitted an early wages claim so Gormley prolonged the negotiations with the NCB and made no attempt to settle by 1 November. It was also the government's immediate interest to separate the settlements and to deal with the fractured British Leyland workers first.

The British Leyland workers settled their wages claim in disarray and in a manner satisfactory to both the management and government. The miners' claim, it was then felt, could be processed without complications. The delay, however, took the negotiations into the campaigning period for the election of the NUM president. The final date for nominations for the election was 2 November; the ballot was to be held on the 2, 3 and 4 of December with the result scheduled to be announced on Thursday, 10 December.

The National Coal Board had offered an increase of just less than 8% on the basic rate

in response to the union's demand. This was rejected by the union NEC at its meeting on 12 November but it decided to resume negotiations on 25 November. At this meeting the Board's offer included an increase of £1 on the bonus rate and amounted to 8.47% for surface workers and 8.99% for face workers. The union negotiators rejected this offer too but agreed to a meeting between the full NEC and Board representatives on 8 December, after the ballot vote for the presi-

### The media identified him with Tony Benn and engaged in a joint character- assassination

dent had been completed. Gormley did not want the crucial stages of the wages negotiations to coincide with the final stages of the election campaign with the possibility of having to hold two ballots simultaneously. It was preferable he believed, to get the election over first and the NEC agreed with him. The NCB rejigged its offer up to 9.1% for the meeting on 8 December but it was rejected by a 3 to 1 majority. The NEC then decided to convene a delegate conference to debate the issue on Friday, 18 December and to hold a strike ballot during the middle

of January 1982.

The carefully drawn-out negotiations could not isolate the wages issue from either the implications of the British Leyland settlement or the election campaign. The British Leyland settlement was portrayed by some miners' leaders as a defeat caused by division and collaboration. It was projected by Arthur Scargill as an example of weakness. The miners' wage issue was affected by the election campaign in a much more profound way.

### The Scargill campaign

The presidential election campaign started as soon as it was announced publicly, more than 18 months ago, that Arthur Scargill was to be the sole left wing candidate for Gormley's post. The Scottish miners president, Michael McGahey, made the announcement and immediately initiated a coalfield election campaign with Scargill's active participation. From that moment Scargill moved around the left wing coalfields addressing meetings and visiting miners' clubs. He knew that in order to win he had to maximise his vote in the traditionally sympathetic coalfields. Later in 1980 Scargill began addressing meetings in Durham and Nottingham. By the time the election was held he had spoken in all the areas

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of the union except for a couple of small ones. Wherever he went he spoke to mass meetings. Miners clamoured to hear him. No miner in Britain was unaware of his presence, his personality and the policies for which he stood.

The mass media portrayed the election as a competition between personalities with differing, contrasting political styles and policies. Scargill was the political extremist, strike-happy and irresponsible. The media identified him with Tony Benn and engaged in a joint character-assassination. In contrast his electoral opponents were moderate, reasonable, sensible and trust-worthy men, standing in the spectrum of trade union policies very much as Denis Healey stood in the Labour Party.

### The campaign and the mining issues

But the media presentation was not as it was seen by working miners. Scargill stood consistently for policies which related to mining conditions. Whenever and wherever he spoke he enunciated these policies, emphasising them differently as circumstances varied, but always projecting what he thought needed achieving. The election issue of *The Yorkshire Miner* listed Scargill's main demands as follows:

'No pit closures other than on the grounds of exhaustion'

'A minimum of £100.00 a week wages'

'A four day week'

'Retirement at 55 on full pay for all mineworkers'

'Wage protection so that a man who's downgraded doesn't suffer a drop in pay'

'Controls on imports of coal and oil so that we can burn our own coal'

'Realistic subsidies for our industry. In Britain we get £2.00 a tonne while the West Germans get £40.00 a tonne'

'Democracy within the union so that conference decisions are carried out'

'An efficient day-to-day union that deals promptly with all the bread and butter issues that never hit the headlines'

The core policies concerned wages, hours, retirement and wage protection and centrally placed within these was the wages issue. Scargill's campaign then, which intruded into the right wing areas of Durham, Nottingham, North Wales and the Midlands where campaigning was rarely practised, was, in effect a wages one. Scargill's view about wages was conveyed to miners in his pamphlet *Miners in the Eighties* and later in his election address, both of which had mass circulations.

Even some of the leaders in the left wing areas of the NUM failed to see the political significance of Scargill's campaign until it



became obvious. Early in November they stated that there was little interest in the pits for a wages struggle. By the end of that month they exclaimed with some surprise that a transformation had taken place in the attitude of miners. Gormley was compelled to reassess his view about what the miners would be prepared to accept by the rank and file expression of dissatisfaction. The officials of the right wing areas reflected the emerging militancy by voting for a strike ballot.

None of these officials ought to have been



A member of the NUM at work in a less-publicised area of the industry.

surprised at the consequences of Scargill's electioneering for they had followed a similar, though less spectacular, campaign in 1968 when Lawrence Daly beat Joe Gormley in an election for the general secretaryship. Daly, like Scargill, campaigned over policies and set in motion a mood which led to the unofficial strikes in 1969 and 1970 and the national official strike in 1972. Lawrence Daly never had access to the right wing areas as Scargill has had, yet his campaign caused miners in many coalfields to discuss their conditions and to question the conventional explanations given about them. All that followed in the 1970s, including the political transformation in Yorkshire and Scargill's emergence as a national

leader, owed something to Daly's election. It was during that election that Scargill made his first impact in the Yorkshire area as the organiser of the Barnsley Forum, a debating society addressed by all the leading left wing leaders in the industry.

### Consciousness

Consciousness raising does not proceed along a continuum, reflecting changes as more and more effort is contributed. The consciousness of people is the result of the interaction of politicising activities and actual experiences and it responds to changes in the relationship between these two elements. Intensive political activity may produce no tangible changes in the consciousness of workers whereas in other situations workers may suddenly, with little prompting, express a heightened awareness of their political position. Workers' consciousness, therefore, fluctuates, sometimes uncannily and seemingly unpredictably.

There is one thing, however, about which one can be sure. That is that an increased political awareness does not occur simply through changes in situations. The dominant ideology, which effectively depoliticises people through both encouraging an acceptance of deprivation and diverting attention from its structural causes, contin-

ues to dominate unless challenged by alternative analyses and explanations. The catalyst for a rising awareness is a sustained, cohesive, logically consistent and effectively disseminated alternative ideology which counters conventional explanations point by point and makes sense to the people concerned. Without this people will remain oppressed but with it they will not necessarily seek freedom for other conditions have to be present.

This statement about the nature of consciousness can be illustrated by the British miners' own experiences since the coal industry began to contract in the late 1950s. From then until the 1970s coalfields were ravaged by closures; the number of miners

was halved in a decade; many moved to other coalfields; pit villages became deserted. Miners' relative wages declined and their working conditions deteriorated. Yet miners accepted the degrading consequences of pit closures as an inevitable consequence of the operation of market forces. Then, from Daly's election campaign which lasted as long as Scargill's an organised movement to politicise miners began. Pamphlets and leaflets were distributed throughout the coalfields presenting alternative political explanations for the causes of the problems miners faced. Meetings were held in miners' clubs organised by local Labour Parties, the Communist Party and miners' lodges at which miners were urged to emancipate themselves.

### The impact of leadership

A small coterie of miners gave this movement its initiative and resources. From Kent came Jack Dunn; from Scotland, Michael McGahey, Lawrence Daly and Bill McLean; from South Wales, Emlyn Williams and Dai Francis; and from Yorkshire, Jock Kane, Sammy Taylor and Arthur Scargill. As the movement made its impact so it widened its membership both within and among the coalfields. The material conditions of mining altered in the early 1970s. Unemployment increased, a severe fuel crisis occurred and widespread industrial action was used to oppose Heath's Conservative government. These changes undoubtedly made miners' protests more likely but they could not have occurred in their particularly victorious way without the organised ideological impact of Dunn, McGahey, Williams and the rest.

It could not have been foreseen in 1970 and 1971 that within three years the miners would take on the government twice and win each time. Nor, once the miners had retrieved their pride and achieved a position of political eminence in the labour movement after 1974, could it have been forecast that they would acquiesce for six years in policies which lowered their living standards or accept an accumulation of unfulfilled resolutions about wages and conditions of work in the mines, despite the intensification of politicising activities among them.

The combination of relevant variables altered in significant ways. A Labour government was elected in 1974 in circumstances which exposed and reinforced the traditional solidarity of miners for the Labour Party. Joe Gormley revealed after 1974 an incredible facility for interpreting and manipulating his union's rules to defeat the purpose of progressive policies. The day-wage system, introduced in 1966, which

provided unity between the coalfields on the wages issue was replaced in 1978 by incentive schemes which divided miners. An intensive media campaign was directed against left wing miners, supporting any device to frustrate their intentions. The behaviour of miners was unpredictable in these changing circumstances.

Miners had not protested against pit closures in the 1960s nor did they effectively protest against them in the 1970s when their union policy was to accept closures only when caused by the exhaustion of coal

reserves. Whenever a movement of protest against a closure was initiated, as in the cases of Langwith in Derbyshire and Teversal in Nottinghamshire, even the miners concerned opposed using industrial action. Then when in February 1980, the Executive of the South Wales Area decided to call a strike against possible widespread closures of Welsh pits, as many as 22,000 out of the 27,000 South Wales miners turned its recommendation down. Against this background the spontaneous strikes against closures in February 1981, which compelled the government to alter its policy and the National Coal Board to renounce its closure list, were unexpected. Of course there is an explanation but it is a *post-hoc* one concerning the continued left wing exposure of the visible injustice of closures caused by subsidised imports from the USA, South Africa and elsewhere.



The result gave a quality of euphoria to the Delegate Conference on 18 December which endorsed an Executive recommendation to strike, if necessary, in the New Year, by a majority of 109 votes to 3. The momentum it created is unlikely to be halted by an objective assessment of coal stocks which are high, coal imports or the government's picketing laws. Only the size of the wage offer can do that.

It has been commonly assumed that the return to piecework in 1978 destroyed the unity which the day wage system had created around wages. Indeed it is speculated that the guileful introduction of area incentive schemes at an initial great cost to the National Coal Board was aimed at breaking the unity which had characterised the 1972 and 1974 strikes. The basic rate in many instances has now become a fall-back rate. Actual average earnings ranged between £40.00 and £50.00 on top of the rate during 1981. But there is a wide disparity in earnings between coalfields and between pits within coalfields. In some areas there is growing dissatisfaction with incentives not simply because of low earnings but also because of the manner in which they are operated by management. The Doncaster miners, for instance, could readily rebel against the schemes.

The point is that there is no evidence that

### The immediate effects

The long term consequences of the Scargill election campaign cannot, then, be pinpointed with any accuracy. The immediate effects, however, are indisputable. Arthur Scargill was elected with an unprecedented majority over his three opponents. In an 80% poll he obtained 70.3% of the votes compared with 17.3% for his closest rival, Trevor Bell, 9.1% for Ray Chadburn, the

incentive schemes since 1978 have disrupted the unity of the miners or that they would do so in 1982. It is not necessary, however, for all miners to be directly implicated in a wages struggle in order to achieve solidarity. A widespread unofficial strike in 1969 was about the working hours of a minority of surface workers. This time the basis of the wages demand is a minimum wage for the lowest paid surface workers. Many underground workers anticipate ending their working lives as surface workers. They easily identify with them.



A strike would have intense political implications because of the facility of miners both to generate fear in politicians and inspiration in fellow trade unionists. All manner of grievances emerge during a strike and the general resentment against the government could be one of these. The picketing laws could be broken. Trade unions engaged in sympathetic action might prosecute their own grievances. There are various possible permutations, depending in large part on the reactions of the government, for at the present the extent and intensity of government intervention is the factor which gives industrial action its political characteristics. If the government itself suffered through a miners' strike it would be, as in the case of Heath's government, through its own incompetence and not because of the direct intentions of the miners. Irrespective of their dislike of the present government the miners are not trying to achieve political change; they are merely demanding a wage increase.

### The NUM

The real question concerning miners is not whether they will strike in 1982 but whether they will achieve a political awareness which would lead them to shape their own destinies in and beyond the coal industry. Evidence of this quality of consciousness would

be the manner in which miners linked their failure to obtain wage increases and to fulfil their own resolutions about working hours and conditions with the nature of British capitalism.

The all-important issue, then, is about the miners' perception of a worsening crisis in Britain and this depends not simply on worsening material conditions, but on discrediting the dominant ideology, for a system which cannot be legitimised in the minds of people cannot survive. Miners identify closely with their union. How it operates therefore and the purposes to which it is put have an important bearing on the miners' own perceptions. The future for miners unquestionably hinges on the extent and nature of democracy in the NUM and, in the process therefore, on the quality of leadership. The NUM leadership after 1974 provided no initiatives. Its task was the negative one of stifling action by sitting on negotiations, complicating issues, compromising to the point of defeat and generally avoiding action. It acted as a buffer.

The NUM is a difficult union to lead. It is not a centralised national union except in its constitution. In practice it is a federation with its various areas acting with the mentality of autonomous county unions, which they were until 1945. The areas possess their own considerable funds; they retain their own policy-making machinery. The decisions of the national union prevail on important industrial issues but areas can rebel and can use their own resources to oppose national policy. The transformation which occurred in the attitudes of miners in the 1970s did so because of the politicising activities of some areas. The composition of the National Executive Committee reflects these area differences for its members go to London as leaders of the South Wales, Scottish, Yorkshire, Derbyshire miners and not as representatives elected by a given proportion of members divided on geographical basis. They descend on London as plenipotentiaries. They are not, therefore, easily controlled. They cannot be browbeaten or imposed upon. They sit, moreover, on the basis of equality, for each member on the NEC has his own vote irrespective of his membership.

### The leftward shift

The present NEC has a small majority which favours right wing policies and which sanctioned Gormley's activities. That majority is likely to disappear soon after Scargill takes office for there are always some members who prefer to be on the official side irrespective of its policies. In any event, changes are taking place in the right-

wing areas. An indication of this is that so many of these areas supported Scargill in the election. But there is also a growing organised opposition to right wing policies and methods. It is a fact that the most democratic areas are the left wing ones for it is not possible to sustain left wing policies without sustained argument and membership participation. The officials of left wing areas have always had to campaign consistently amongst their own members. New, young branch officials in the right wing areas are demanding more discussion, a greater participation in the union affairs and a stricter

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accountability of their area officials. This process will result in a qualitative change in area leaderships. Durham, for instance, will change in much the same ways as Yorkshire changed in the early 1970s. The Midlands area and Nottingham will follow suit. During the 1980s there will be a left wing consensus on the NEC. But this will raise more tests or Scargill than it will remove.

### The Scargill presidency

Joe Gormley had to contend with an intelligent, volatile minority. Scargill will have to cope with an intelligent, questioning majority. He will not be able to impose himself as Gormley did. The great quality in an effective democracy is that nothing is taken for granted; all policies have to be explained and all acts justified. The new consensus in the NUM will cover a spectrum of viewpoints and Scargill will have to identify with one of them, isolating the more demagogic leftist ones despite their populist appeal. The president, of course, is not a free agent. Scargill will have to work within real constraints; he will be confronted by painful options which are not always apparent to the ordinary members. In this situation he could easily take a course which separated him from the union membership. If this happened he would have to resort to the methods of his predecessor and the whole process of democratisation, and, in consequence, politicisation would be held back. No previous NUM leadership has tried to pursue a dynamic leftwing course. Scargill's ability to encourage this and to work within the pressures it creates will be the measure of his success.