

**The miners' strike is no ordinary strike. It is a resistance movement which has spawned quite new alliances.**

# MINING the popular front

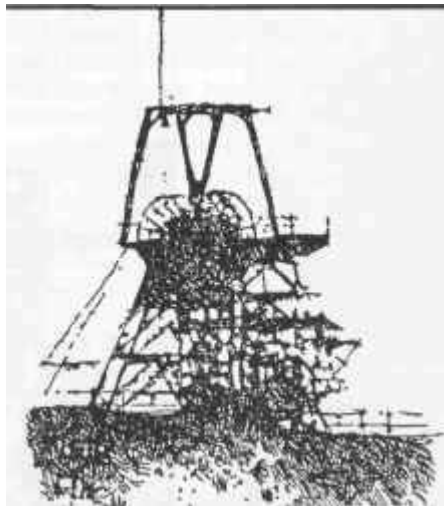
Hywel Francis

THE **BRITISH MINERS' STRIKE** of 1984-85 has raised some fundamental questions concerning the nature of industrial and political alliances. In particular, the Welsh experience may offer some useful lessons beyond the NUM and beyond the strike. The South Wales coalfield with over 20,000 miners has remained solid in support of the NUM's fight for jobs, pits and communities: after ten months barely 1% had broken the strike and in the 14 central valleys only 14 had returned to work by mid-January. By contrast however, support in the small North Wales coalfield (only two pits and less than 2,000 men) was always patchy and virtually collapsed overnight in November.

The emergence in Wales of a broad democratic alliance of possibly a new kind - an anti-Thatcher alliance - is not the reason for this resistance. But an examination of its origins and development will perhaps begin to explain the intensity of the phenomenon. The Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities grew out of a linked realisation that in order to feed miners' families more efficiently and in order to explain the case for coal more effectively, greater unity was needed. But what was also important was that it was a *political* realisation, born out of necessity within the miners' struggle, and arrived at virtually simultaneously by several political, trade union, cultural and other organisations.

When the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities was launched in Cardiff's City Hall on October 21 to consolidate and broaden support for the NUM's strike throughout Wales, its proceedings were dramatically interrupted by sixty London local government workers marching in with a banner proclaiming 'Brent Nalgo supports the Dulais Valley'.

The following week a large contingent of gays and lesbians were in the Dulais Valley as guests of miners' families because of their outstanding fund-raising for the miners' cause. A short time later food arrived in West Wales from the Greenham Common women who had earlier in the strike been entertained by a South Wales striking miners' choir.



**Put more sharply, it is a resistance movement.**

Even earlier in the year the sedate calm of respectable Wales, absorbing its annual dose of culture at the National Eisteddfod, was broken by public meetings on the Eisteddfod field in support of the miners. Farmers, church leaders, teachers, public employees, Welsh language activists, historians, poets, folk-singers, communists, members of the Labour Party and Plaid Cymru, ministers of religion, the women's movement and the peace move-

ment all made common cause in support of Welsh mining communities.

Out of this remarkable and new unity on the Eisteddfod field and a myriad of other new alliances elsewhere, grew the Wales Congress.

Such seemingly unlikely and unexpected alliances could never have been anticipated by Nicholas Ridley MP when he drew up his secret anti-union and anti-strike plans in 1978, which anticipated major industrial strikes but did not foresee broad popular support for such struggles.

What is the political significance of these new alliances forged during the miners' strike across and beyond the British coalfields and does the Wales Congress, in particular, represent a 'new politics'? Or will it all fade away with the end of this 'exceptional' industrial struggle?

Throughout the late summer of 1984 the NUM leadership was understandably preparing to maximise its support at the TUC and Labour Party Conferences in the autumn. But the real business of struggle and survival was going on elsewhere. For one reason or another, and now with the benefit of hindsight, we can truthfully say that Eric Hammond of the EEPTU was right: the trade union movement, with the glorious exception of the railway workers, has not delivered the goods when and where it matters. This is not to say that there have not been magnificent collections and tremendous public demonstrations. But Christmas parties and food parcels alone, important as they are, do not win public support, let alone achieve power cuts.

## **Alliances**

Old-fashioned trade union solidarity has, at best, been reduced to 75 turkeys from Llanwern steelworkers. At its worst, it's

the army of well-paid faceless scab lorry-drivers trundling daily along the M4 to supply foreign coke to the Llanwern 'brothers' who supplied the turkeys. That is the reality of an industrial battle which relies essentially on what amounts to no more than a 'syndicalist' strategy of industrial confrontation and regular sectional calls for a general strike and mass picketing to resolve the situation. Fortunately, the miners' strike in every coalfield has been far more than that - it had to be because of the inadequacy of the Triple Alliance and the ineffectiveness of the TUC in enforcing Congress decisions.

Nevertheless there is no doubt that the miners' struggle has often been conducted as if we were living in those far-off days of industrial militancy in the early 1970s - successful mass and flying pickets, workers' occupations and unemployment at less than a million. It was the era of unity of transport workers and miners on picket lines which gave birth to the Wales TUC. One other factor is forgotten about that period. Even though the two strikes of 1972 and 1974 were of relatively short duration, the victories were not achieved by industrial action and industrial solidarity alone. Despite power cuts, the miners won broad public support which ultimately led to the fall of the Heath Government. There was broad support even if it did not develop into tangible broad alliances.

Since then the trade union movement has been debilitated by mass unemployment, impotent TUC leadership, the Thatcherite ideological offensive and successive state assaults, from Grunwick through to the NGA, on its very existence. Until the present miners' strike, the movement had been in retreat for years.

In the summer of 1980 in the wake of the first Thatcherite onslaught on the steelworkers, the industrial correspondent of *The Times* wrote that we were about to witness the most severe testing of the 'shock-troops of the labour movement' - the South Wales miners. Some observers had already written them off. Others predicted their skirmishes in defence of jobs and communities in 1981 and 1983. But what no one could have anticipated was the intensity and ferocity of the state onslaught on the British miners in 1984 and the manner in which they successfully withstood it.

That survival, that resistance, is encapsulated in the words of an old Cynon Valley miner: 'After the experience of the last ten months, the miners and their communities have learnt how to survive together - they shouldn't ever have to fear

the prospect of unemployment again.'

Even more perceptive and revealing was the simple ceremony in Italy during the strike when women activists from Coelbren and Hirwaun were made honorary members of the Italian resistance. In a period when the NUM is being attacked by every arm of the state, it is not an exaggeration to say that the union is about to be driven underground. The freezing of South Wales miners' funds through sequestration in August was part of this process. The subsequent survival of the union in South Wales inevitably begs certain questions.

#### A **resistance** movement

In the Welsh context, the nearest historical comparison we can make with the events of 1984-5 within communities and valleys is the broad unity and resistance during the miners' lockout of 1926 and in the mid-1930s on the questions of struggle over mass unemployment, scab unionism and aid for Republican Spain. At that time, class and community converged, significantly enough at a time of trade union weakness. *Mining* communities were becoming or had become *unemployed* communities and their struggles even embraced chapels and shopkeepers. Such struggles were essentially extra-parliamentary in character and involved the mobilisation of whole communities.

But that socio-political unity was transient and despite the courage of exceptional Labour leaders like Aneurin Bevan the broad-based unity around the South Wales Council of Action of 1935-6 was broken by the anti-communism of right-wing trade union and Labour leaders who saw Labourism as the rightful monolith in the valleys.

Historical links there are. The strong sense of solidarity and the organic relationship between union, community and pit is still so intense that it cannot be dismissed simply as blind loyalty to be 'lauded by future trade union historians' as South Wales area director Philip Weekes remarked when the anticipated return to work in South Wales again failed to materialise in the New Year.

However, it would be much more fruitful for our purposes to examine our immediate past in order to understand the developments which led up to the Wales Congress.

There is no doubt that in many respects the Wales Congress might be seen as only a *formalisation* of what also exists to an extent in all the other striking British coalfields, the most significant feature of which is the

creation (as in 1926 but much more successfully now - partly because there are fewer miners) of an alternative welfare system. Put more sharply it is a *resistance* movement. The way striking mining communities have responded to the threat to their very existence has been the most remarkable feature of the strike.

This socio-political development is undoubtedly part of the same phenomenon that resists rate-capping in local government; that opposes the abolition of the

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GLC and other metropolitan bodies; the mobilising of the unemployed around the People's March for Jobs; and the mass peace campaigns against Cruise and Trident. In that sense they are all extra-parliamentary struggles which place greater emphasis than hitherto on educating and mobilising communities and organisations in broad alliances.

In a Welsh context, it is part of the same process that saw in the early 1980s the women's anti-nuclear march from Cardiff to Greenham Common; the Welsh Language Society campaigning against unemployment because without work, the Welsh language will die; valley parents involving themselves in direct action to oppose cuts in school bus services (including the setting up of an alternative school); and valley communities uniting with NUPE members to oppose hospital closures.

The common threads in all these struggles were the tactic of non-violent civil-disobedience; the mobilising of people beyond the traditional parameters of the labour movement; and most important of all, the mobilising of whole communities in their own defence.

#### **Unifying the threads**

What the MacGregor NCB closures announcement in March 1984 did was to accelerate these trends and ultimately force their convergence. To say that the 'women against pit closures' movement suddenly transformed women's attitudes is to misunderstand the processes which had already been operating in mining communities. The Greenham Common protest was started by working class women in the Rhondda. Very many of the



Welsh miners barricade of their NUM headquarters in Pontypridd Mid-Glamorgan - in an attempt to stop bailiffs sequestrating their funds.

women active in the 1984-85 struggle were already prominently involved in politics and the peace movement at a local level.

Furthermore, the Welsh Language Society had already made the link with workers in struggle well before the miners' strike. People and organisations were therefore already making connections: they were already identifying allies and enemies.

What the miners' strike in all the coalfields did was to begin to bring such developments together, involving now not just single communities or groups of activities but whole regions and tens of thousands of people. It is also something beyond that. This new kind of alternative welfare system has created in many places a very resilient and tough resistance movement. Everyone should now acknowledge that the network of women and mixed support groups has given rise to an alternative, community-based system of food, clothing, financial *and* morale distribution which has sustained about half a million people for nearly a year. The social and political skills of organisation and communication are akin to the experiences of people during a social revolution. Women, men and indeed children have learnt more about the strengths and weaknesses of the state apparatus, more about the problems of building working class solidarity and above all more about their own individual

and collective human potential than at any time in their lives. The new links within and between coalfields, with non-mining areas in Britain and indeed internationally are all pregnant with political possibilities.

What emerges is a network of unexpected alliances which go far beyond the traditional labour movement. It is a broad democratic alliance of a new kind - an anti-Thatcher alliance - in which the organised working class has a central role but a role which henceforth it will have to *earn* and not *assume*.

#### **A new alliance**

In this potentially permanent anti-Thatcher alliance, the women's movement and the peace movement will have prominence because, unlike the bulk of the trade union and labour movement during the run-up to the miners' strike, they have played a crucial role in raising the political consciousness of the British people. It is even conceivable that the churches will have a part in such an alliance because they have raised very pertinent political, social and moral questions during the strike concerning the nature and role of the state and of the dehumanising character of capitalism. In particular, the initiative of the Welsh Council of Churches revealed a very deep understanding of the political origins of the crisis facing all mining regions and put forward proposals to solve

them which placed the struggle in the wider context of government energy policy, what they have termed the 'vagaries of an undisciplined free market system' and the need to emphasise the dignity of human beings and communities.

Conscious of the human and organisational forces being unleashed by and for the miners in the midst of the crisis, the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities initially set out to bring the debate back to one over the future of the coal industry rather than 'picket line violence' and to increase the unity around the mining communities. It was in effect an all-Wales support group.

Its programme of aims highlighted the need to identify and communicate the real issues at stake - the need for a sane energy policy and the safeguarding of jobs, communities, peace and democratic rights. It also sought to encourage local authorities to commission social audits of the effects of the current pit closure programme in their localities (as is being done in other parts of Britain).

At a time when enormous pressures were building up on the NUM in South Wales, particularly as a result of sequestration and fund-raising, the Congress sought to get the Welsh people to carry their share of the burden.

Indeed the Congress very quickly received backing from over 300 prominent

people in Welsh politics (Plaid, Labour and CP), local government, trade unions, the churches, the arts, farmers, the women's movement and the peace movement. The Congress was born out of a realisation by large sections of the Welsh people that the miners were struggling for the future of Wales. If Thatcherism could defeat the miners, then *all* Welsh communities, were in danger.

Its steering committee embraces all these organisations and meets weekly to discuss strategy. As yet there are remarkably few differences over tactics or political initiatives.

The miners' strike has therefore created a Welsh unity and identity, overcoming language and geographical differences, which failed to materialise in 1979 during the devolution referendum when a four to one vote rejected a measure of independence. It was the fear of such a return to the superficial and sterile politics of devolution of 1979, that made a tiny number within the Welsh labour movement hesitate about associating with the Congress. Significantly, their influence was negligible. Dark hints of a 'Commie and Nats plot' was the language of the past. They soon realised that unless they joined, the world would pass them by.

### None are minorities

One of the great advantages of the Wales Congress was that it ensured that the NUM, despite serious rebuffs from steelworkers and lorry drivers, never felt isolated within Wales. For example, just as the Wales Congress was launching a series of nationwide rallies in November, the NCB in South Wales started to increase its aggressive managerial onslaught on the still rock-solid NUM membership. Congress leaders including Labour Euro-MP David Morris and Plaid President Dafydd Elis Thomas MP spearheaded a counter-attack by attempting to interview NCB managers personally. They asked why were they, as trade unionists, prepared to supervise scabs (unlike NACODS) and why were they actively participating in a government plan which would ultimately socially divide and industrially destroy mining communities.

The solidarity of the miners in South Wales held, and the Congress played its part then and later in holding the line to 1% despite over ten months of struggle.

After less than two months the Congress was already strengthening itself by decentralisation. There are now local Congresses in North Wales, the Rhondda, and the prospect of others in all the valleys, in

London, Ireland and even Nottingham.

The strike has therefore not just been about mass picketing. It has been about how people begin to take control of their own lives. It has been about women and men from all the coalfields learning about the many-sided role of the state in industrial battles and that the fight for jobs and communities was and is the experience elsewhere in Britain and abroad. When the South Wales Striking Miners' Choir entertained an entirely black audience in Walsall, one of the choristers paid tribute to the 'ethnic minorities' who had been so outstanding in their support during the strike. A black leader responded: 'The Welsh are the ethnic minority in Walsall'.

The strike has begun to teach us all that none of us are minorities. The Wales Congress is trying to build an anti-Thatcher democratic alliance which will hopefully go beyond the strike and turn all those so-called 'minorities' who have supported us into an irresistible and united majority to fight for peace, jobs and communities. There will inevitably be problems, the greatest of which will be the possibility that all the positive features of unity and experience everywhere could be eclipsed by the fragmentation of the NUM.

## FOR THE PROTECTION OF MINERS

Northeast Lancashire and the Miners' Strike, 1984

Photographs by Phil McHugh

Text by Rick Gwilt



Phil McHugh's photographs offer one man's view of Northeast Lancashire and the miners' strike during 1984. Without reference to picket-line scenes, the pictures show Lancashire miners, their families and supporters, as well as the links forged with other people, other places and other causes.

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