

The miners' strike has dominated the political scene for a year. And it has raised some profound strategic issues for the trade union movement.

THE MINERS' STRIKE has dominated British politics for a year. At the time of writing this article the strike continues. Whatever the final outcome, the strike is profoundly rich in experiences and lessons, and when it is over there will be a need for it to be fully studied and analysed, and lessons drawn.

In the meantime, the first responsibility is to do everything possible to help the miners, and stop the Government from achieving its objectives of imposing a humiliating settlement aimed at destroying not only coal mining capacity, but also militant trade unionism in the industry. It is not the moment for drawing 'final definitive' lessons from the strike, nor is this article intended to be advice to the miners on how to handle the situation.

However, it is important to look in a limited way at this stage at how the experiences of the strike relate to current controversies on the Left.

Some differences with 1972/4

In the course of the last 11 months there have been inevitable comparisons with previous miners' strikes. A powerful current on the Left has been to see this strike as a replay of those. Such comparisons, of course, do throw up similarities, but also vital differences, which have been seriously neglected by some on the Left. One fundamental difference this time is that the strike is on the issue of pit closures and jobs and not on wages.

The difference is important. It is the reason argued why a national ballot was not held. Ballots were taken in 1972 and 1974 because a national wage claim and action around it affected all miners, and all were entitled to vote on whether or not to strike.

In 1984 areas affected directly by pit closures came out on strike based on earlier ballot decisions, then took the traditional course of seeking wider solidarity. This applied to the Scottish and Yorkshire areas, which received official backing from the NUM executive, and to this day the rest of the coalfields are out in solidarity, though they have a direct interest because of threatened pit closures in their own areas.

The difference is important in another more general respect. A strike on pit closures, as against, say, on wages, raises wider issues such as jobs, the saving of a community, environmental considera-

STRIKING the RIGHT NOTE

Pete Carter

tions, and a national asset in terms of Britain's future energy policy and the role of coal within it.

The second critical difference concerns the transformed political climate compared with the early 70s. We are now confronted with a very different kind of Tory government, one which has taken the trade unions on not infrequently and very seriously weakened them. The political and industrial balance of forces is very different from the early 70s. The last 11 months bear testimony to this.

The Thatcherite Tories have, ever since the early 70s, been determined to avenge the humiliating defeats inflicted by the miners in 1972 and 1974. Indeed, this experience of the early 70s played no small role in stimulating and shaping the more general Thatcherite project, which has marked such a break with previous post-war Toryism. Central to Thatcherism is the need to undermine and weaken the trade union movement, with particular attention to the miners, traditionally the most well organised section of the working class, with industrial muscle to go along with it.

On 27 May 1978, the *Economist* printed details of a Tory policy group report, drafted by Nicholas Ridley MP. It discussed the setting up of strict financial targets for nationalised industries and their preparation for piecemeal privatisation. In an annex, it suggested that there were likely to be challenges from unions over wages and redundancies. Having also suggested that the battle should be fought on grounds chosen by the Tories, it pinpointed the coal industry as being the most likely battlefield. In order to prepare for this it suggested that a future Tory government should: build up coalstocks, particularly in power stations; make contingency plans for the import of coal; encourage hauliers

to recruit non-union drivers; introduce dual coal/oil firing in all power stations; establish a large mobile squad of police to deal with picketing; and cut off the money supply to strikers and make the union finance them.

The Government's approach to the present dispute was, thus, long in preparation.

Experiences of the strike

Because of the traditions of the miners and of the way certain sections of the labour movement perceive struggle, there has been a tendency to see the strike in traditional terms and as a narrowly class issue. Of course, it has had those dimensions. But it has been much more besides. It has unleashed a richness and breadth of experience rarely seen in previous industrial struggles.

This has been no ordinary industrial dispute. It is already the longest running national strike this century. The bravery and determination of the miners and their leaders is outstanding. It is certainly by far and away the most remarkable strike that has ever taken place in defence of jobs, characteristically a very difficult issue round which to mobilise strike action. But because it is about jobs, it has been able to activate the industry and communities in a new way. It is not just a strike of miners - it is a resistance movement of the coalfield communities. Indeed, without the activity of communities, the strike would have been over months ago.

Within the communities, of course, the role of women has been unprecedented, and has taken completely new forms. Their attitude, commitment and activity in the strike has been a major factor in its ability to continue. This change is partly because pit closures are an obvious threat to whole communities whereas wage disputes do not have this character; but also it is linked to the work of feminism and

women's liberation over the past two decades. Some on the Left have counterposed the coalfield women against the women's movement. On the contrary, the latter has profoundly influenced the women against closures campaign. The women's movement has dramatically shifted attitudes and instilled a new spirit of belonging.

The courage of the Greenham Common peace women has given a confidence to women about their ability to be effective in the politics of the day. The theory and practice of the women's movement helped create the opportunity for women in the mining communities to get involved in the strike as well as helping to create the basis for important changes in relationships within the mining communities. Thus, while women's support has been for male jobs and for the survival of communities where traditionally the woman's place has been in the home, for many the experience has helped to develop a much wider understanding, not just about the strike, but about themselves and their lives.

The final point I want to make here concerns broader solidarity. The strike has evoked a remarkable response from the length and breadth of Britain. 'Dig deep for the miners' badges have become a personal statement and expression of identity. The collections of food and money have been more widespread than in any strike since the war. It is no exaggeration to say that without this support from outside the coalfields - from local authorities, trade unions, feminists, black people, local Labour Parties, Communist Party branches, gays and lesbians and many more - the strike could not have been sustained. This is not just a material question: that wider support has helped to maintain the morale of the miners themselves.

Some lessons of the strike

These experiences of the strike not only reflect the circumstances in which it has taken place, but also themselves suggest how and under what conditions it might be successful. Three points stand out. Firstly, the need for the unity of the miners themselves. Secondly, the need for maximum solidarity from other sections of workers, and thirdly, the need to win the widest possible public support and sympathy. Nor can these be regarded as separate entities to be arithmetically added together. They are very much inter-related and interact with each other. Broad public sympathy, for example, can only help to raise the morale of the miners and unify



Throughout the period of the strike the NUM has not been able to resolve the deep divisions that exist among the miners themselves. Given the divisions, especially those in Nottinghamshire, together with the Government's level of preparedness, there was no chance of a quick victory based on the miners' industrial muscle alone, or indeed in any way similar to the victories of 1972 and 1974. It is important to note here that the divisions amongst the miners were not simply the result of not having a national ballot. The divisions were already there and were part of the

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Government's preparedness for strike action.

The divisive effect of the introduction of the piecework scheme, and of the differing 'future expectations' of the various coalfields - all taking effect in a more general climate of 'I'm all right Jackism' generated by Thatcherism - promoted divisions regardless of the ballot argument.

There seems no point at this moment in speculating whether 'it might have been different', as one must recognise the possibility that workers who do not respect picket lines might not have respected a ballot majority either. Further, one must recognise the feelings of those areas most affected by the closures, who could not accept that more prosperous areas should

them. One of the major problems during the strike has been the tendency to see it in terms simply of the miners themselves, or the miners plus wider industrial action. The position of the Communist Party has, from the start, been that the strike could only be won by moving on all three fronts. The narrow approach might - up to a point - have worked in the early 70s. It won't now. Circumstances are quite different. The unity of the miners, broad support from the trade union movement, together with a wide swathe of public opinion sympathetically disposed to the miners, have been and are the indispensable ingredients.

ballot on the future of their threatened communities. The only guarantee of unity is an understanding of the issues at stake and acceptance that in the long run, all are involved.

The campaign to win solidarity action from trade unionists in other industries has been very much affected by divisions amongst the miners. It impaired the legitimacy of the strike in their eyes. But in spite of these problems, there have been some brave and good examples of solidarity. The NUR, ASLEF, and the NUS, have been able, under different circumstances, to take industrial action in line with last year's TUC decisions. To a lesser degree solidarity has come from certain sections of the TGWU, but they are not enough and in the crucial areas of steel and power generation, appeals for industrial action have failed.

One cannot just present the problems as the leaders letting the workers down. There is room for criticism of leaders on the Right such as Hammond of the EEP-TU and Lyons of the EMA, who have been forthright in their opposition to the strike and have refused to work for any meaningful solidarity. But the problem extends wider than that. Some unions with left wing leaderships have also been unable to deliver any industrial action. In other words, the problem is not just one of leadership but the attitude of the rank and file. It is clear that trade unionists have got to be won on the issues; support for the union is not automatic, especially as this Government now appeals directly to the members over the heads of the trade unions.

The profound differences between the current situation and 1970-1974 are striking here. Then there was fuller employment; the trade union movement was buoyant and in confident mood, and was in growth. During this period it had defeated the Industrial Relations Act, and many attempts at wage restraint. Today we have a very different picture with mass unemployment, factory closures and redundancies, and in the case of the miners the most attractive redundancy terms ever offered to any section of workers alongside guarantees of a job to those who wanted it. The fall in trade union membership, anti-trade union propaganda and laws, linked to the political advances of Thatcherism have all changed the situation radically.

This is one of the main reasons why the movement has not been able to respond in an effective way. Unfortunately, sections of the movement, not least on the Left, refuse to recognise there has been any

change at all. Their failure to recognise and analyse these changes, and their consequent reliance on the actions and approach of yesteryear as models for today's struggles and victories, are counter-productive and only go to help Thatcher gain a tighter grip on the reins.

the attitude of the parliamentary leadership has been one of damage-limitation

Public opinion

A crucial question has been and remains the battle for public opinion. A sympathetic and supportive public opinion is absolutely vital, not just to collect food and money, though this is important. It is essential to help create a climate that isolates the Government rather than strikers from public opinion. Government strategy from the start has been to isolate the strikers from the working class as a whole and from public opinion in general, by posing issues such as democracy in relation to the ballot, picket line violence, describing the strike as political and condemning the demands as 'unreasonable'. Notwithstanding this attack on the miners, there has been a very wide potential to deal with all the questions raised and turn the arguments back on the Government. Lots of people are not sure that the miners are in the right, but still do not like the Government's hard line. Winning them

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requires consideration of what are the main issues raised by the strike and how to present them.

If public opinion is viewed as peripheral, then the language of the strike becomes coded, and not even understood by many trade unionists. In this respect there should have been an early condemnation of violence from whichever quarter it came, while emphasising the overwhelming responsibility of the police in this context. Support from the bishops and churches should have been worked for and welcomed, not met with derision as it was in some quarters. The church still remains an influential body in Britain and their sympathy could have been used more effectively.

Whilst mass picketing is an important

weapon for workers in struggle, it should not have been presented as it was at times - for example, in relation to Orgreave - as the *only* way forward. It can even be counter productive amongst the miners (as it was at some pits in Nottinghamshire). The mistake made by some was to pose picketing as the only real way to win against other forms of activity. More effective work to win public opinion is not in opposition to picketing; anything that can favourably influence the minds of workers who are being picketed actually helps the picketing to succeed, as well as giving confidence to workers in other industries to take industrial solidarity action.

What has failed to happen is the bringing together in a mass popular movement of those forces within our society that already have demonstrated sympathy for the miners' case. This development has been restricted because of a view held that the strike can be won by picketing alone, by the miners on their own.

Calls for 'join us on the picket lines' for the majority fall on deaf ears. Not only is it impractical, but for many it is a style of work they are not prepared to identify with or get involved in; but they would welcome, and should be given the opportunity, to demonstrate their support.

Such a way could have been found through a national demonstration last year that could have brought together a massive and impressive gathering of people, making it difficult for the Government not to respond. But here again, there was resistance from forces who view such initiatives as a waste of time.

Instead of the labour movement insisting on this kind of all-round development it retreated and in so doing opened up space for those forces who see the miners' strike as some final showdown against the capitalist system. This latter attitude has been reflected in calls for a general strike. Such calls are actually harmful to the trade union movement, even if made from good motives, because they bear no relationship to what is possible at this stage.

The strike has raised a wide range of issues. Miners' jobs and mining communities, privatisation, democracy (trade union rights, civil liberties, national police force, etc), and energy policy (including nuclear power and the future of coal). However much the first three of these points could raise a response amongst organised workers with already a fair degree of commitment and understanding, the latter two (and especially the last), were vital as the basis for a much broader alliance.

The miners' leadership did from the

start, in their arguments about *Plan for Coal*, pose that issue, though in the actual conduct of the dispute they were primarily concerned with holding the situation of the strike within the coalfields, without which there could have been no struggle. But for the movement as a whole, it must be said that the presentation has not succeeded in imaginatively and successfully getting across the image of miners fighting in the interests of the nation, and of defending one of Britain's most important national assets. Here the Labour Party has been at best very disappointing (though many local Labour Parties have done magnificent

work). The attitude of the parliamentary leadership has been one of damage-limitation, seeking to minimise the implication of the strike. This hasn't worked and won't work. The strike has been and is far too important. It is a resistance movement of workers and their communities against Thatcherism. The responsibility of the Labour leadership has been to generalise that struggle: it never even tried to. Without wishing to engage in sectarian competition, it must be said that the Communist Party's contribution - both materially and ideologically - has stood in stark contrast.

All this does suggest some vital lessons for the working class as a whole. In the present economic and political climate, even the best organised and most militant sections of the movement will face considerable difficulties if they cannot present their demands in terms capable of winning considerable support and building alliances.

The Government's strategy clearly is to isolate the best organised and most militant sections. The way to avoid this is not to refuse to struggle, but to struggle with a clear understanding of what is needed to win.

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