

The miners' strike was undoubtedly the most remarkable strike this century, and certainly the longest. Twelve months of extraordinary sacrifice and heroism. Now is the time to analyse and learn the lessons.

## **The Miners' Strike ASSESSED**

# **THE MINERS' STRIKE A Balance Sheet**

## A roundtable discussion

The participants in the roundtable are: Alan Baker, Secretary of the Oakdale Lodge, South Wales Area of the NUM and a member of the Welsh Committee of the Communist Party; George Bolton, Vice-President of the Scottish Area of the NUM and chairperson of the Communist Party; and Ken Capstick, NUM Branch Delegate at the Stillingfleet colliery in the Selby complex of the Yorkshire coalfield and a member of the Labour Party. It is chaired by Dave Priscott, a member of the Communist Party Executive Committee.

*The miners' conference decided on a return to work without a negotiated settlement. That decision was taken under the pressure of the continuing drift back to work. How do you assess that ending of the strike? Do you consider it as a defeat, a victory or what?*

**Ken Capstick** I don't think it's a defeat, because at the end of the strike we still had 60% of the miners on strike. And of those who went on strike in March 1984, we still had some 85% out. And when you saw the miners marching back into the pits and you looked at their faces, that didn't spell defeat. The whole thing enters a new phase now. Yes, there was a drift back to work, and we had to take notice of that. The miners had been on strike 12 months, they'd taken a battering in terms of hardship. They'd taken a psychological battering from the mass media, day in and day out throughout the whole of the dispute. The remarkable thing is that there were so many people still on strike at the end of it. And back in the pits now there's still, I sense, a feeling that the fight isn't over. Even though in many areas they had gone back to work, they didn't return because they'd suddenly changed their views, and gone over to accepting the Coal Board's point of view, far from it. They'd been taken prisoner. Prisoner, because of the hardships, and the battle fatigue, and the psychological warfare that was waged against them and the pressures of it all. I don't believe the miners consider going back to work a defeat, it's just that we're entering a new phase of the struggle to save pits and jobs.

**Alan Baker** I think that however we went back, with or without

a negotiated settlement, where we have not succeeded in defeating or compelling the Government to withdraw its pit closure programme it must be regarded as a major defeat. And I think we'd better recognise it as a defeat. If we don't we're going to create illusions. When the reality creeps up on the miners, and the Board, and the Government starts its programme of pit closures, there'll be disillusion, despair and dependency. We've got to understand that we've no more to give. We came out on strike, we were out for 12 months, we were in a hard battle, and eventually it was the miners who had to give in and go back to work. Whatever we may discuss about the way we went back to work, these are the hard facts of life. To go back without a negotiated settlement I think is even worse than to go back with a bad negotiated settlement. Because in my opinion we have now got the potential for Area Boards to negotiate separately with their own separate areas of the union. It will help the Board in its aim of getting the areas to compete with each other, and help pave the way for eventual privatisation. We've got all kinds of problems and confusion as to where we stand now because we haven't gone back with a negotiated settlement.

**George Bolton** My view is that the word defeat is a very emotive term. It's got a sort of ring of finality about it. And therefore I would hesitate to use the word defeat in that sort of simplistic way. In any estimate of the strike and its outcome at this stage, you would be bound to talk about a very very serious setback for the NUM, and for the whole movement. And not to say that, in my view, would be to start off from the wrong footing. Yes, we marched back with banners, with pipe bands, with a lot of fighting spirit left in the ranks of the miners, the battle's not finished. But the analysis of the struggle that has taken place is important in terms of what lies ahead. Mistakes have been made during the last 12 months, and we'd better learn those lessons if we don't want to make the same mistakes in the 12 months that lie ahead.

**Ken** We went on strike over the issue of pits and jobs. We didn't get what we wanted, I accept that. But I don't think that was all the strike was about, it was about a lot more than that. I'm



convinced that the Tories wanted this dispute, they prepared themselves for it. And it was more than pits and jobs. In order to carry through their economic policy, the Government, when it came to power, decided that they were going to take on the trade union movement, and to try and destroy us. First of all by creating mass unemployment to weaken the trade union movement, and then the anti-trade union laws to further weaken the ability of the trade union movement to fight back, and then to systematically attack different sections of us one at a time. Now, have they achieved what they wanted to achieve as a result of the strike? That is why I say this is not a defeat for us. I believe that Margaret Thatcher could well have created irreparable damage to herself and this Tory administration as a result of the miners' dispute. The economic situation in the country is far far worse. I don't think they're going to be able to get themselves out of it very easily. When the full costs of the miners' dispute are passed to people, they are going to turn against Thatcher. A recent opinion poll on television suggested that a very high percentage of people thought that the country was now more divided and were blaming Thatcher for it, that class divisions in the country had become more obvious. The miners' strike raised all these issues much more than we'd managed to do before it happened. Now I see a situation for Margaret Thatcher where almost everything that happens becomes a crisis for her, whether it's the Belgrano, phone tapping, Ponting, whatever it happens to be. It's started to get like that for her. They haven't achieved what they wanted to with the miners' strike. I don't believe they've broken the NUM or the trade union movement in the way that they set out to do over 12 months ago.

Alan I agree with Ken 100% that the Government instigated the strike, and they certainly had a strategy. Their strategy in relation to the coal mining industry was to develop the nuclear power station programme, to import cheap coal as they see it from any part of the world and, in the process, to close many of Britain's nationalised coal mines and sell off the few super-pits that were left. That's their strategy in relation to the mining industry, which fits into their overall strategy of creating a situation in Britain which suits the multinationals - where there's no powerful trade union movement, they're able to move their capital in and out as they wish. By defeating the miners they've gone a long way along that road. I agree with many of the things you have said about the positive outcome of the strike, such as the fact that it has progressed feelings against the Thatcher government. It was the first time a national force was able to rise up and stand in opposition to the Thatcher government since 1979. There hasn't been a movement like that since 1979. But call it defeat or whatever, it's a very major setback, and in my opinion it's going to be a long time before we see the miners on strike again. And, if we couldn't defeat the Government when we were out for 12 months, there is no way we're going to defeat them by staying in work, trying to operate so-called guerrilla tactics, or an overtime ban, which I don't see the miners going for because they are not stupid. They were out for 12 months - except Nottingham and some others. They are going to ponder on this, the fact that even they didn't succeed in stopping the Government and the Coal Board.

Now this creates a problem of what force is there that is going to harness the positive features of the miners' strike in order to develop the campaign against Thatcher. If we believe that the Thatcher government will collapse because of certain negative features which were created by the miners' strike, then we're making a serious mistake. Precisely because they have a political strategy, they are prepared to spend any amount of money. When

Chancellor Lawson said that this was a great investment, a worthwhile investment, that's exactly what they meant. If the miners, who have one of the most powerful trade unions in Britain, in the sense that it provides most of the energy the country needs and has political sympathy from the mass of the people, couldn't win, then a lot of other trade unions and organisations are going to say how can they win. I think there is a way of winning. But it's not by just going out on strike as we used to in the time honoured way, trying to make the employers, or the Government, suffer more than you will. We've got to start rethinking in a fundamental way how are we going to develop a movement to defeat Thatcher.

George Clearly Thatcher has planned this since about 1978. I would doubt if Thatcher ever envisaged absolutely smashing the miners' union in that sense, because that's a virtual impossibility. My view is that they set out to inflict a defeat, or major setback, on the miners' union and that's precisely what has happened. In my view the extent of that setback will be demonstrated fairly quickly. They now feel sufficiently strong and confident to move on a whole number of fronts - MacGregor's talking of sacking 25,000 this year. No qualms about it. And that means X number of pits are closed this year. So the nature of the setback will reflect itself in the union's serious inability to combat the coming onslaught by the Board. I think that's how you measure the crippling effect on the NUM and the size of the setback.

*Whether you call it a defeat or whether you call it a setback, one thing you can't call it is a victory. And after 12 months of tremendous effort, it is important to look at why one of the hardest fought battles that I can remember didn't end in victory. There's a lot of reasons, but undoubtedly one was that the miners themselves were not united. Most of Nottinghamshire worked throughout the strike and that had serious consequences. It didn't only mean that coal was being produced. It provided an argument that we wouldn't accept, but a lot of workers did accept, that if all the miners themselves aren't prepared to come out on strike, well it's a bit of a cheek calling on us to come out on strike in their support. Nottinghamshire is sometimes presented as if it's the inevitable result of the history of Spincerism, and the piecework scheme and all the rest of it. But that suggests it is inevitable Notts will always scab. And if you take that approach what future is therefor united struggle? So I'd like your views on this. Do you think there are things the union might have done differently that could have made the strike more solid?*

George We shouldn't assume that Nottingham was always a coalfield that was not prepared to get involved in struggle or strike action. In 1972 and 1974 the Notts miners voted for strike action. But of course that was a different situation, that was a wages question which affects all miners in exactly the same way, and it sprang from the fact that we had achieved wages parity in the British coalfield, the same rate for the same job throughout Britain. So it was a much more unifying situation. But when it comes to pit closures, that's not got the same unifying impact. That's been shown throughout the last 30 years. It's tremendously difficult to mobilise industrial action against a pit closure programme. Part of the Government's preparation for the strike was the now infamous incentive scheme designed to impact on areas like Nottingham. When it came to earning bonuses Nottingham always, even before the present bonus scheme, was a high earnings coalfield. That was part of the plan of the Coal Board and the Government, to splinter and divide, and make it almost impossible to get a national unified strike by the miners. Of course some of it does spring from Nottingham's history because

we've never had, that I can recall, any significant, powerful, organised, left progressive leadership in the Notts coalfield. Indeed, the strike was something of a tragedy, because the Left had begun to emerge in Nottingham over the course of the last two years, just before the strike. But it tended to be at a certain level, at the branch leadership level, or in the shape of Henry Richardson and so on.

**Alan** I think myself that Spencerism is of very minor consequence in relation to the problem we have with the Nottingham miners. I believe they're caught up much more with certain ideas common to wide sections of the British working class, including the power and steel workers and some of the miners that went on strike, that if you keep your head down and battle on and make your industry profitable, it will survive, that somehow the Government is trying to make British industry competitive in order to live in the modern world, that anyway whatever the Government says, it's going to shut pits and there's nothing you can do about it. Now I've been against mass picketing from the word go in this strike because it wasn't only an industrial battle we were in but a political battle where we should have tried to argue the case for coal against the Government's strategy, and to bring this out to millions of people. We should have done exactly that in the Nottingham coalfield. Indeed we haven't done anything like enough of it within the coalfields where we were on strike, let alone in the rest of Britain. Mass picketing was totally counter-productive - in relation to just about everything - but certainly in relation to Nottingham. George mentioned that they came out in 1972 and 1974. I think it's also true to say that when we had the initial attempt at mass closures in 1981 they were also beginning to turn out in Nottingham. There was the development of a national strike taking place and the Government at the time pulled back within three days because they hadn't prepared sufficiently. I think that Notts, on that occasion, were also geared up to come out on strike even on closures. By March 1984 the Government were much better prepared not only in the plans that they'd laid down, but in the battle of ideas, the climate of opinion with four million unemployed and the run down of other industries such as steel.

**Ken** There's one point about the Notts situation which hasn't been brought out. In the first few days of the dispute the leadership of the Notts miners wasn't the best kind of leadership. They came out one day saying one thing. They came out the next day saying something else. But another mistake was definitely the fact that we went in far too early with the mass pickets from Yorkshire. I don't think it was the intention of the Yorkshire officials, or our co-ordinating committee to go into Nottingham with mass pickets that early. But we've got pits right on the border of Notts. The lads drink in the same pubs and clubs as one

## The Miners' Strike ASSESSED

another. And when one pit's on strike, and there's a pit down the road, it might be in Notts, but to the lads it's not like that. And what happened was that an immediate mass picket took place, the lads went into Notts. I think that alienated a lot of the Notts miners. What happened then was that we failed to reverse the situation. We could never get across to the Notts miners the importance of getting in behind the rest of us to win the dispute. I don't know what we could have done to get them out other than completely change our tactics. It was obvious that mass picketing wasn't going to work, because we had the police surrounding Nottingham, we couldn't get into Nottingham. We were just throwing money at the Notts area, a lot of money, day in and day out, sending pickets and getting nowhere at all, not even getting to the pits. Perhaps we should have tried a rethink then. But I'm not so sure that the damage hadn't already been done, it was impossible by then. It would have been good if in some way we could have stood back from it, and then tried to get into the Notts pits, get into the Notts branches with our national officials, and other area officials, and to have tried to get the case across as to why they should have been out on strike with the rest of us.

**George** What one could certainly say about Nottingham is that perhaps if we'd tried mass meetings, rather than mass picketing, we might have got a different result. We tended to assume that Nottingham was much worse than it really was, hence the use of mass picketing. The NUM went into action not of their own choice, but were forced to, and almost virtually assumed it was the same as 1972. You only were required to do the same thing, and you would get the same result. Looking back, of course, that was a ridiculous assumption because it meant we hadn't learned the lessons of Grunwick, and how the police have been trained to handle mass picketing. The lesson of Grunwick was that on the day of the biggest picket you could mount, we only closed the factory for three hours. The minute the mass picket disassembled it was business as usual. And if you hadn't learned the lesson at Grunwick, they they certainly rammed it home at Warrington with the NGA. Not just in terms of how they handled mass picketing, but the kind of instructions that the police obviously had to wade in with the boot, the baton, with the horse, and do what they liked to pickets. In the face of these lessons, and in the understanding of what Thatcherism is all about, looking back at it, it must have been a serious mistake to have assumed that in 1984, in view of what had happened in 1972, it was only a matter of time till you won another historic victory. A lot of that thinking was prevalent in the minds of many NUM activists.

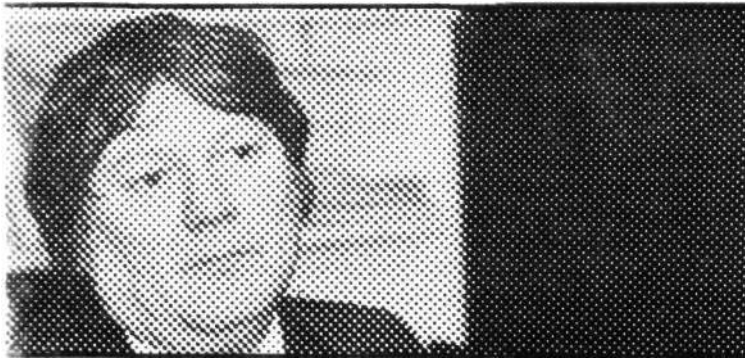
**Alan** Maybe you could understand it happening spontaneously, in the emotion of the strike starting, but what must give us cause for concern is when Arthur Scargill, four weeks before the strike finally came to a halt, still calling for mass picketing. Now in no



George Bolton - Scottish NUM.



Dave Prescott - Chair.



Ken Capstick - Yorkshire NUM.

way am I trying to single Arthur out, because I believe by and large he represents the thinking of the miners. Why didn't we learn, in 12 months, that this was the wrong tactic. We've got to answer this question. If we don't, we're not going to deal with the situation we're now confronted with and really begin to make a move forward. It indicates a low level of political consciousness amongst the miners, and more widely, that they weren't able to grasp that we were in a very new type of situation.

**George** Take Dennis Skinner. He was shouting general strike when his pit, Bolsover, was working. Tony Benn was shouting general strike, and in Derbyshire 80% were working. It's a reflection of a range of thinking in the movement that's not caught up with the reality of Thatcher and Thatcherism, and the state of British politics.

*You all seem very much of one mind about the effect of the immediate surge of mass picketing. Many months ago, Henry Richardson, the secretary of the Notts miners, was quoted as saying that 'if they're going to try to stop our men going to work by sheer weight of numbers, then it will be completely counter-productive. It will alienate the men that instant'. You all pretty well confirm that. Now, I want to deal with the question of the national ballot. I've read up the reports of a number of public opinion polls. MORI reckoned that last March a national ballot of the miners would have produced 62% for the strike, and in April that had gone up to 68%. I'd be interested to know, firstly, what your estimate is of what the result of a ballot might have been, and secondly, if there had been a ballot and you'd won it, would Nottinghamshire have accepted it and come out?*

**George** Timing is very important. In my view the NUM could have won a national ballot hands down within days of the special conference in Sheffield in April. And there was no doubt in my mind at that time that a national ballot would have been decisive for the strike. Now if the mass picketing in Nottinghamshire the month before hadn't taken place, if you'd had a series of mass rallies in Nottingham, together with the special conference and the change of the ballot percentage rule, then in my view we could have won a national ballot and, against that different background, Notts would have come out.

**Ken** Yes I think the same. I thought there were times - in April, May, June - when we could have won a national ballot hands down. And probably we missed a chance. But the trouble was that the national ballot had been made into an issue in itself. It was like giving in. You've got to remember that we had lads, masses of them, who were picketing every day, total commitment, never seen such commitment from people. And they were saying 'Shove your ballot up your arse.'

**George** The ballot developed into a sort of virility symbol.



**Ken** Yes, it did. Quite honestly, you mentioned the word ballot at your peril, in the miners' clubs and so on. They used to turn mnd and say 'We've said we're not having one and we're not having one.' They looked at it that Margaret Thatcher wanted a ballot, MacGregor wanted a ballot, the media wanted a ballot, and they weren't going to have one.

**George** But Ken, that links directly to Nottingham. Because to have a ballot was to please Nottingham.

**Ken** Yes. And there were times when we could have won the ballot, and you felt it in your bones, if we could just go now, and move quickly. I'm talking about having a ballot in a matter of a few days so that we didn't give the media a chance to carry out a really vicious campaign over a week or more. We could have done it, because we didn't have to have a campaign, the build-up was already there in the strike itself. I used to think at times, well, if we could do it and get the majority we need, that would be ideal. But then there was always the nagging doubt. Would Nottingham come out? I had my doubts.

**George** All through this strike I was conscious of the Coal Board plotting and planning their strategy day and night throughout the course of the struggle. I was conscious you had a coal cabinet who were meeting day by day. But I was equally conscious of an NUM that was not sitting day in and day out discussing the dispute, every aspect of the dispute, the strategy and tactics of the dispute. And that goes back to your point, Alan, that in many ways it was 12 months of a defensive dispute, because we weren't planning our offensive strategy.

**Alan** In the first part of the dispute, if my memory serves me right, the executive was meeting as if it was a normal situation. They were meeting once a month for the first couple of months. Then they went to once a fortnight. And then of course as events were catching up on them they were meeting more frequently. Now if we'd had a ballot from cold, nationally, before the strike started, I think it would have gone against us. I'm speaking from my experience in South Wales. Only 10 out of 28 pits voted to come out on strike, the other 18 were picketed out, though it wasn't all that difficult to picket them out. And then it became as solid as anywhere in Britain of course. But if we'd had one later on, around April-May, I'm positive we could have won with a fairly substantial majority. I've got my doubts about Nottingham coming out even then, because I believe there are deeper problems than the ballot as far as the Nottingham miners are concerned. And, by the way, even if Notts had come out, I still don't think we would have won the strike in the easy way that a lot of people think we might have. We would still have had major difficulties and problems. A lot of the ultra-lefts, and some people that think in this way in the union, argue Nottingham let us down, and if they'd come out we'd have won the strike. I don't think that at all.

*The ballot raised two opposing principles. It was as much a matter of*

principle to some miners, that they must have a ballot before they struck, as it was a matter of principle to others not to have a ballot. And in the battle of principle around the ballot, the real principle, how to win, got a little bit lost sight of. I suppose there's one object lesson from all this, it's that if you've got a fairly major section of the workforce, in a key coalfield, whose support you're not sure of, somehow you've got to win them, you can't bludgeon them. Anyway, for whatever reason, the miners were divided and Nottinghamshire was working. As against that the Government had gone in for very careful preparation over a long period. Setting those two facts side by side, government preparedness on one side, NUM divisions on the other, there was no chance of winning by the miners' industrial muscle alone. That's my assessment. Industrial solidarity from other unions was a matter of life or death in this battle. Although there were some good examples of solidarity, in general it simply wasn't at the level needed to be effective. I'd like to know why you think that was the case. Is it all somebody else's fault? Is it all because there are problems in the leadership of other trade unions? Is it the inevitable result of mass unemployment? Or again, in retrospect, looking back over the whole dispute, were there any things the miners could have done themselves that would have helped to win support from other unions?

**George** When you were addressing factory gate meetings of other workers, you got support in terms of money and of food. But you got a strong feeling of, 'we can't come out on strike with you because our factory isn't very secure, there are four million out there, and please give us coal, because if we can't get coal, and we can't keep producing, then we lose the market for our factory's product, and our factory will close'. That was a very important factor, and it's all about this government, and Alan's point about the kind of ideology they've been conducting over the last few years and how that's been seeping in. The other thing is that the NUM seemed to have a view that the most important thing was to go to the TUC and get those resolutions through and they would then be implemented in some significant mass way, and of course that was a total misconception. My view is - and again it relates very much to what lies ahead - that the NUM should have spent much more time throughout the length and breadth of Britain. I remember suggesting, either at the April or July conference, that it was absolutely crucial that the NUM should have some sort of miners' march - coal not dole - which would have meant that throughout Britain there'd have been meetings, demonstrations, leaflets, materials, and miners speaking at every factory gate in Britain, hammering home what the miners' dispute was all about. And in that way creating the conditions that, when you got to the TUC and got the decisions, you'd prepared the ground in a mass way to appeal to workers then to respond to those TUC decisions. Yet we never had one in 12 months. There was resistance to it. I think it was remarkable, in the fact day and night of the anti-NUM, anti-Scargill, anti-miners media barrage, that, after 12 months, there was still a very significant percentage of British public opinion that either supported or had sympathy for the miners' case. It demonstrates how much out there the miners didn't tap and which they could have tapped and created the conditions for the isolation of Thatcher and the NCB from the weight of public opinion. Despite all that sympathy and support, I'm prepared to say that if you walked down any street in Britain in the 12 months of the strike, and asked people 'what's the miners' strike all about?' they would have had difficulty in telling you exactly what it was about, which tells me that we haven't spent sufficient time in getting it across in a mass public way.

**Alan** The problem was we saw ourselves fighting a narrow

## The Miners' Strike — ASSESSED —

industrial battle, and this was never going to win from the word go, despite all the power, strength and determination which the miners, their families and their communities showed. The fact is that this whole approach was nowhere near enough even to contemplate winning against the Government. We needed to have developed a campaign and built up public opinion, in the sense of exposing what the government strategy really was, and explaining the case for coal. And I don't mean just jobs and saving mining communities. I mean the fact that coal has a future. A lot of people think we were trying to defend the past, an historically outdated fuel, that the future was nuclear power, computers and scientifically based industry. There was no conception that we are confronted with a new political phenomenon, Thatcherism. There was no basic understanding of that at all.

**Ken** There are some things we'll never know. If we'd had Notts out from the beginning, how much support would we have got from other unions that we didn't get because Notts didn't come out. Because there's no doubt about it, that was a factor. When we went around talking to people, we were asked the question, as you've said, how can we expect to get our people to do anything when half of your own people are working. And then we've got to ask ourselves what has happened to that certain something that made a man not cross a picket line. Because all over the place people were crossing picket lines. The public saw it very much in terms of miners fighting miners. And that's what we appeared to be doing, with the police in between us. It was miners that were shouting at miners. So we couldn't get a lot of support that we probably would have if it hadn't been for that. I don't know whether we could have won with the Notts area out, we'll never know. But obviously we would have had a lot more support.

*There was tremendously wide public sympathy for the miners in 1972, maybe a bit less in 1974, but still a great deal, and not just from other trade unionists. And the issue in both cases was a wage increase. Now we have an issue where it ought to have been easier to win public support, because a wage increase for the miners 10 years ago didn't directly and obviously benefit the man or woman in the street. But there's a 100% case for the coal industry as against nuclear power and oil. Yet somehow we've failed to get it across. I did get the feeling myself that at least in the early stages the NUM leadership didn't seem to think that public opinion was important.*

**Alan** The leadership of the NUM at all levels felt that public opinion ought to be on their side, but it was an 'if they're not for us they must be against us' type of situation. They somehow believed that we should have public opinion on our side, but they did not realise or understand that it needed to be won.

**Ken** I don't accept that the leadership didn't try to win public opinion, or didn't think it was important. We go on about getting our case across, but we've got to have the ways and means to get it across. We have a national newspaper that comes out once a month, we have a newspaper in Yorkshire that comes out once a month and so on, but apart from that we don't have access to the kind of media facilities that we ought to. We might get Arthur Scargill on television once in a while, but then he's answering specific questions and it's not easy to start putting the whole of the case across. Meanwhile, we face this constant barrage. We just

haven't the facilities to take the argument to people.

**Alan** Part of our trouble was internal, and what I would describe as the low level of consciousness of miners. One of the trends was syndicalist, that we could do it on our own. As you say, we've got the industrial muscle. I've heard miners' leaders saying that if necessary the miners will win this struggle on their own. That's a trend of thought in the miners' union, which created problems in relation to trying to win public opinion. If we pursue this question of the strength of the media, which is undoubtedly correct, to its logical conclusion, we are never going to win. After all, we had the strength of the media before we came out on strike, but a fair proportion of the miners ignored the media's call not to go on strike, and came out. There's what people perceive as being the truth. And the media very often portray lies which don't measure up to the experience of working people. Prior to the strike it didn't measure up. We understood that what they were telling us wasn't true, there were going to be massive pit closures, our communities would be devastated, so we saw through the media. Therefore, if we put the truth about all the issues on leaflets and in *The Miner*, there are possibilities. We could have done a lot more with the leaflets and *The Miner*, and the time we had on television. I think there was no understanding of what was necessary to win public opinion. They kept repeating certain basic tenets about how many pits were going to go if MacGregor got his way, and the police were beating us up, and arguments of that nature, which was mainly what was stuck to. The question of the value of coal for the county, what the Government was really trying to do, how it could have linked up with the fight on unemployment, the fight against nuclear power stations and all this, was never effectively put. In fact it wasn't put at all in most cases.

**George** I think you're not comparing like with like, 1972 with 1984. It's a different era, different circumstances, different issue. In 1972 it was a wages question. There was tremendous sympathy because miners' wages in 1972 were absolutely atrocious. That's what gave rise to the strike. But of course, on top of that, the movement was at a different level, a much more buoyant movement - you'd defeated Barbara Castle's *In Place of Strife*, you'd attacked Robert Carr's bill, you'd had the victory of the UCS workers, and again you had full employment. Now when it comes to 1984, I wouldn't argue that the NUM wasn't conscious of the importance of public opinion, that would be silly. But I don't think that they had an estimate of how important it was. And they certainly didn't have a strategy for capturing it. It certainly strikes me that on too many occasions during the dispute, our people on national platforms were not always saying the best thing, or the right thing, or saying it in the best way. I can remember early on hearing speeches saying 'and we will defeat this government'. You were trying to make it a strike to defeat the Government. Whereas the men simply went on strike to save their jobs, their pits and their communities. So you were causing confusion among the miners themselves on that question, let alone the general public. And all that connotation, of industrial action to defeat the ballot box, in the British condition the ballot box is so important, we had to fight to get the ballot box in the first place. It's a very important question in the minds of the people of Britain. You elect or defeat the governments and local authorities with the ballot box.

I remember vividly, it must have been in June or July, when Mick McGahey and I were discussing with some of our colleagues this bigger, wider campaign for public opinion, and the importance of such things as the churches, and you could see that the

assembled company were astounded. 'The churches? Goodness, what are you talking about, the churches, what have the churches got to do with it?' The churches almost had to force themselves on the scene, with the Bishop of Durham speaking out. They were speaking almost against the wishes of the NUM in the dispute. But having done that, the way the establishment turned and attacked them, demonstrated the importance the churches had in the dispute, and more generally public opinion. You can always argue how difficult that is, without the command of the television and the press. But we were extremely weak on this question of mass communication. That's epitomised by the fact that after 11 months you'd have had great difficulty on the streets of Britain in getting people to tell you precisely what we were on strike for. That must be a very powerful indictment of the kind of campaign we had. Maybe we were very well intentioned, maybe we were trying to talk to the public, but we were very unsuccessful.

*There are some questions about the future I want to put to you. First of all I want your views on what's going to be done on the unity of the miners themselves. Miners who worked from day one, miners who went back in the course of the strike, and miners who marched back with their banners at the end, are all miners. They've got to live together in the same industry. And if we want to win future battles we've got to find ways to build some degree of unity.*

**Ken** We are going to have some problems, because there's a lot of ill feeling around. The situation in pits where most miners stayed out on strike until the end, and only a few went back, will deal with itself. I don't think there are going to be any serious problems there. It's pits where it's half and half. And there's a lot of pits where even 60 or 70% of the men had gone back to work and then the others came marching in. That's where a job is going to have to be done, and it's going to be down, at the end of the day, to the branch officials at those pits to rebuild the situation. I work in a pit - in Selby coalfield - where we had a lot of men back to work by the end of the strike. And I've had to go back to the pit and work for reconciliation. I can see no other way forward. I can't draw lines. I can't have scabs, super scabs, and extra super scabs. I can't have a sliding scale of scabbery. So I've gone back to my pit, and I've made a very bold statement to the lads that there's no such thing as a scab working at the pit where I work. That's very, very hard to say, because some of them went back in November. I am hoping from there to rebuild my branch and get the lads back together again, with some faith in the union. Most of them that went in are still solidly 100% NUM members, and wouldn't wish to be anything else. The NUM has got to reach out to those lads, and win them back, because we can't win anything without them. Anything else is playing right into the hands of the Coal Board. They are the ones who want to foster divisions, and we've got to make sure they don't.

**Alan** In my pit, and in most of South Wales, we haven't got too much of a problem. But in a sense it's still a problem. Because your basic principle still applies even where you only have a handful. It is more difficult where the coalfield, or the pit, has been quite solid. We've got four in our pit and they are very isolated. If we'd had 100 or 150 I think it would have been a lot easier funnily enough. In Cynheidre, for example, they're not treating them as scabs, they're treating them as men who have problems, who had a breaking point before the rest of us did, but we were all rapidly approaching it. Somebody said in our conference, 'The way we're going on, the last man back to work would be calling the last but one a scab'. And that is the kind of

atmosphere we've got into. I agree with you, we've got to get out of that. Even if you went back to work in November, by god you'd been out on strike a long time by then. And most of the men in South Wales had been out until after Christmas.

Now I am absolutely opposed to this concept of expelling Nottingham. And I've got the feeling, rightly or wrongly, that the national executive are backing away a little bit on this. But it is equally as wrong as not dealing with scabs on a local level. We've got to find ways of building bridges with Nottingham. Because it's getting more and more difficult what's happening up there. But if we've been arguing that we couldn't win the strike if Nottingham wasn't with us, what chance have we got if they go right away from us totally? We've got to find some way of bringing Nottingham back into the NUM fold.

**George** Obviously we're interested in having Nottingham back within the fold of the NUM. But I have serious doubts as to whether or not that will be possible. I've noted the sacking of Henry Richardson. And it's becoming clearer and clearer that political forces are at work in the Nottingham coalfield. The Government's involved. No question about that. The Coal Board's involved, the Freedom Association, they're all involved in Nottingham. In my view steps are being taken to get Nottingham *de facto* and in reality out of the NUM, and that's very serious for this union. Now that raises the question of what you do about it. Unless leaders like McGahey, Scargill and Heathfield are very conscious of this, and as national officials of this union get themselves into Nottingham, begin to address large numbers of Nottingham miners, find ways of getting materials into the pits, then we'll be accepting precisely what Lynk and co in Notts are trying to do. If we just sit back and think there'll be some simple way, and we can all be friendly and nice and reunite with Notts, it would be a very serious political mistake.

*What do you think are the next steps for the union in the fight against pit closures?*

**Alan** I don't think we can contemplate simply industrial action. The miners coming out on strike is not on the agenda for the foreseeable future. And if we don't find some other way of broadening out the campaign and involving others, then any form of industrial action for the miners is likely to be out. So we will now have to do what we should have been doing throughout the strike, developing the campaign and case for coal, arguing it out the length and breadth of Britain in a mass public campaign. George talked about this earlier. We've got to turn to the public now, learn the lessons that we didn't do this right throughout the strike. It won't be easy, but that's the road we've got to travel. We've got to build up a political movement which is going to isolate the Government instead of them continuing to keep the miners isolated, which is what has been their strategy, and they've succeeded up until now.

**Ken** There's no way that we're going to get another strike in the next three, four, five years, maybe more. It depends of course on circumstances. But I don't think we're easily going to get the lads to take strike action again. I don't know how long we'll be able to keep the overtime ban on. One of the problems with the overtime ban is that Nottingham have taken it off. We've got to get back to the campaigning spirit. We've got to get down the pit, we've got to get to the lads, and we've got to start rebuilding the thing. We've not got to talk defeatism. That does worry me. We have got to tell them that we are now going to move on to a new phase in the

## The Miners' Strike ASSESSED

struggle because we've got to protect pits and we've got to protect jobs. I think the lads understand that quite clearly. That's why they've been on strike for such a long time. We've got to go back to them and we've got to campaign with them and work for it. And of course we've got to work with the rest of the public as well, try and get the arguments across. It's a case of back to the drawing board very quickly and putting together a strategy for a campaign where we can go back on to the offensive again.

**Alan** In Wales, a very broad committee was set up with churchpeople, other trade unions, different organisations, and that's an indication that with the support groups that are dotted up and down Britain, they could form the basis of such broad committees, and could be developed. I'm sure that a lot of them feel that they want to stay together and do something. And if they just stay and continue to try and raise money, they will just fade. But perhaps given the idea that they could become broad campaigning bodies maybe then this would continue.

**George** I very much agree that we now have to do the things we didn't do, or didn't do sufficient of, during the course of the strike. The NUM will have to get involved in a whole number of things, for instance, the question of nuclear power, because their policy is opposition, and there are forces in society getting more and more concerned about nuclear power stations. It's this question of finding allies for your case. And of course we have to address the question to the people of Britain of the role of British coal and its importance. Britain is an industrial nation. And any industrial nation that depends on foreign coal, and on foreign nuclear power technology for its power and energy resources becomes prey to foreign country blackmail and economic and political decision making and so on. This never really came across in my view. The miners fighting for their pits and the British coal industry are fighting for Britain's economy because of what's linked to the mining industry. In a sense the miners' struggle was a struggle for the alternative to Thatcher. But that never really came across. That's the kind of campaign that's facing this union. A positive element is that the progressive forces are in charge of the union, give or take the Nottingham situation. So in that sense you've got a big advantage as opposed to the days of Joe Gormley. If he controlled the apparatus you couldn't campaign in that way. It seems to me you're going back to do a whole number of things - popular fronts revisited indeed . . .

