



SID PLATT
Miners' strike - a NALGO view



Trade union analyses of the miners' strike since March are akin to the NCB's coal production figures during the dispute. At best, some have used a lot of paper and ink but studiously avoided the most crucial questions. At worst, the controlled silence has been almost audible. If the latter mood prevails, it will inevitably give scope for the manipulation of a lasting psychological depression. Perhaps the important question the movement should answer is: did we come out stronger than we went in?

Events in West Midlands NALGO during the dispute lead me to believe there is scope for saying 'we are stronger'.

Many consider the holding of our special



national conference in October 1984 (which was requisitioned by opponents to NALGO support for the NUM) to be the significant feature. History will record that the conference rejected a call for further central donations to the NUM to be blocked pending a national ballot of NALGO members. However, the 'victory' was little more than a technical one as the motion narrowly failed to reach the two-thirds majority required by the rules. This had the effect of stopping the leadership from providing financial support from central funds (The figure at that time was approximately £35,000 - or 5p per member).

However, the obsession with central donations in my view detracted from the

significance of massive individual, branch and regional financial aid. Prior to the October conference there was a period of hyper-activity in the branches. The debate centred around the issues of the absence of an NUM ballot and picketing but it provided an opportunity to raise the core issues of the dispute and, where used, the relevance of these to the defence of the public sector.

The trouble with these debates was that they were actually too late and many NUM supporters were on the defensive. It should also be pointed out that in West Midlands there were examples of opponents of support for the NUM suppressing actual debate about issues under the cloak of outrage with the national leadership's central fundraising. I submit that the real significance of the debates were that they raised awareness of class issues amongst NALGO members - in many cases for the first time!

While recognising some defeats in actual debate, it is also worth pointing to events in West Midlands branches after the national conference decision. To many, justice had been achieved simply by holding the conference and a number of branches who had requisitioned the conference held meetings prior to Christmas and

agreed to provide financial donations from branch funds and individuals' pockets.

Another aspect of the dispute is the recognition of the inertia that existed. Dozens of policy making committees were held and despite the immensity of the dispute, they retained a 'business as usual' air, albeit with the occasional collection. I doubt whether NALGO had the monopoly on this problem, but it reveals just how easily important issues remain compartmentalised. If the term *labour movement* is ever going to mean anything we really must sort this one out.

It is true that, along with other trade unions, NALGO failed to mobilise support by industrial action. In recognising that fact, solidarity work through fund raising assumed an even greater importance - not only in terms of alleviating hardship to mining communities but also in stimulating debate on the issues behind the dispute. The problems we faced in this period revealed organisational and political strengths and weaknesses. The judgement of 'strength' is often seen in 'wins and losses'. I question whether such stark conclusions can be reached in light of the NALGO experience. Our strength has been the recognition of the issues involved in the dispute.

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