

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The breaking of the NUM?

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The threatened secession of the Notts area represents a profound threat to the future of the NUM.



Notts delegates remain seated during a standing ovation following the President's address at the NUM conference, July 1985.

*'Twenty-five years ago I wrote a pamphlet. I made a beautiful draft with diagrams of one Mineworkers' Union. I drafted it believing I had a nice flat floor on which to build a lovely union. I have learned from bitter experience that it is not a flat floor; it has different District interests with different District conceptions, different degrees of development. This we are now proposing is an attempt to make a superstructure over what already exists, and we cannot do it independently of what exists.'*¹

LITTLE HAS REALLY changed since

Arthur Horner, the Communist President of the South Wales Miners' Federation uttered these words in 1943 when the old Miners' Federation of Great Britain was beginning its lengthy and comprehensive discussions on a new rule book for what ultimately became the National Union of Mineworkers, formed in 1945.

There may however be one significant difference. With the end of the year-long strike in March, despite brave words and good intentions, the NUM has been unable to stop the National Coal Board's closure programme (a projected loss of 25,000 jobs in 1985 alone) nor has it been

able to prevent the victimisation of over 600 activists, to say nothing of its many imprisoned members. The reality is that mining communities are mentally and physically exhausted and many individual miners are solving their problems (in the short term) by taking redundancy. In this atmosphere of continuing and deepening crisis, there is a dangerously persistent attitude amongst a minority of activists that if 'you don't obey the rules, you can't belong to the club'. Put another way, for the first time since the founding of the MFGB in 1888-9, there is a possibility that the principle of organising *all workers*² in



Henry Richardson, Notts NUM General Secretary, at IN UM conference.

and about the coal mining industry could be abandoned on the basis that 'Nottingham has never been any good anyway, look what they did to us in 1926.'

It is that intriguing but uncomfortable compromise between different coalfield 'interests' and the always overriding principle of one union for the mining industry embodied in the old constitution of the NUM, which Horner quite rightly described as an 'emasculatation'. But that arrangement has always been a *cardinal* one for British mining unionism - whatever the means and whatever the consequences, *all* miners had to be part of the one organisation, the NUM. (However reactionary you thought other coalfields to be.)

Forty years on from 1945, with the immediate experience of a fragmented year-long struggle behind them and increasingly surrounded by new government legislation relating to trade unions, the NUM leadership, with great speed, manfully tried to update its rules to take account of changed needs and circumstances. (One change would mean that the president would remain in office for life by simply removing his casting vote.)

The breakaway

The annual conference of the NUM in July which considered the new rule book, had one very serious problem - the attitude of the Nottinghamshire delegation. It was unfortunate that controversial rule changes making the union more centralised, were raised at such an inopportune time - so soon after the strike. The major-

ity of Nottingham miners had balloted early on against strike action, had decided (in December) to avoid obeying national rules with which they did not agree, and finally in May, balloted to oppose the new rule book, even if it meant leaving the NUM.

The acceptance by the conference of the new rule book and the dismissal from office of the Nottingham anti-strike leaders, Prendergast and Lynk, precipitated (rather than caused) the breakaway of the Nottingham area. It is clear that plans had

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been long laid for such a step: Lynk had already had discussions with a Durham breakaway union and had created a so-called 'Triple Alliance' with the other non-striking areas of Leicester and South Derbyshire. The speed of the NCB's recognition also indicated prior knowledge. What is not clear is whether conference decisions made any reconciliation impossible. Mick Costello's words in the *Morning Star* (2/7/85) now have a very hollow ring to them: 'Yesterday's vote [on endorsing "all actions" by leadership during the strike - HF] suggests that in the discussion later this week on rule changes to confront the anti-Tory legislation, the union will find a way of proceeding that will unite the membership.' The fear now is that the exact opposite has occurred.

There is no doubt that following the end of the strike (as throughout the struggle) the NCB strategy under McGregor has been aimed at encouraging such splits. Their patronage of the 'National Working Miners' Committee' and their recognition during the strike of the Durham breakaway, the 'Colliery Trades and Allied Workers Association' is clear evidence of this.

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Comparisons with 1926 (when coal-owners, including Tory Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, gave financial backing to a Nottingham breakaway), can be interesting, but often a fruitless exercise. It is true that the breakaway did not achieve anything other than weaken the bargaining



Roy Lynk at IN UM conference.

power of all miners, but it took eleven years for Nottinghamshire to return to the fold (a minority, however, had remained loyal throughout).

It would be more instructive to look for parallels in the present day mining unionism of US coalfields where Ian McGregor learnt most of his managerial style in the mis-named 'right to work' states (or as the miners' union, the UMWA, calls them, 'right to work for less') where union shops are outlawed. The norm for all the American coalfields is a miners' union (the UMWA) whose members barely produce half the overall US coal output: it is a union weakened by a range of 'company unions' and raging non-unionism. That pattern, encouraged by NCB higher management and an enduring 'scab-hating' mentality amongst some miners, is now emerging in the British coalfields just at a time when the NUM is faced with the biggest round of closures in its history. This aggressive managerial strategy, so evident in the 'return to work' tactics of the NCB, thrives on confusion and division. It is the prerequisite for an Americanised coal industry - privatisation.

Pure but impotent

Before any defence of the industry can be mounted and any campaign against victimisation launched, the NUM must devise its own strategy to win the hearts and

¹ Report of the MFGB Annual Conference, July 1943.

² Part of the first object of the 1945 NUM Rule Book.

minds of *all* Nottingham miners, to say nothing of waverers in other coalfields. How, for example, will strike action be threatened, let alone mounted without Nottinghamshire? Unfortunately however, thanks to a media campaign and the particular way the strike developed, issues have become personalised. As a result, Arthur Scargill is portrayed in the Nottingham coalfield (and increasingly beyond) as some kind of a John L Lewis type union boss who threatens local democratic rights within the NUM and is anxious to call out his members without a ballot, at any and every opportunity³. As a consequence, the campaign for the survival of the NUM, at least for the time being, has become indistinguishable from Arthur Scargill's personality and style of leadership. Whether we like it or not, there is a problem in seeing everything as 'Scargill's strike' or 'Scargill's union'.

In the meantime, there are some who might consider it advantageous for the NUM to lose a troublesome Nottinghamshire and maybe other 'moderate' areas, and might welcome a realignment of left forces through mergers or alliances with other trade unions in Britain and abroad. As Aneurin Bevan would have said, such dreams would render the NUM pure but impotent.

In any event, if there are such thoughts, then they should be the subject of open debate and discussion. But such sideways glances can never be a substitute for winning *all* the Nottinghamshire miners back into the fold, whatever happened in 1984-85. One rank and file Nottinghamshire leader is quoted as saying recently that differences were being overcome after the strike: 'All we want to do in Nottinghamshire, former strikers and workers alike, is to forget the past and work for the future.' Another, who had worked through the strike, said that 'someone' was doing Thatcher's job for her: 'I only wish the

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national leadership had not taken this action against Nottingham now and waited for events to take their course. . . ' (*Guardian* July 8, 1985).

The question whether a rival union to the NUM should exist in the mining industry is far too important to be left to a local ballot in the Nottinghamshire coalfield. Fortunately the Labour Party and the TUC have already refused recognition to the breakaway. But a determined breakaway (with encouragement from the NCB, the Government, sections of the media and the kind of business interests behind the 'National Working Miners' Committee') could still survive and become an appalling nuisance, especially if the Board concentrates more of its central managerial operations in that very coalfield. It might even survive a defeat in a ballot by getting recognition in certain favoured pits throughout the country (against all nationally agreed procedures).

The leadership of the breakaways in Nottinghamshire and Durham are neither naive nor misguided. They have a clear political mission for others - to complete the unfinished business of breaking the NUM which began during the miners' strike. Lynk has already claimed that he wishes to develop his organisation into a new national union with members in all coalfields and eventually make it bigger than the NUM. There is no doubt that the cracks in the NUM during the year-long struggle are now being deliberately widened, by forces outside the industry. Even more worrying is that this internal crisis is being exploited to create problems for a revived Labour Party and prevent the possibility of its return to power. What

effect will a rival and 'independent' Nottingham have on all the Midlands coalfields where there are so many marginal seats?

Whether it grows in the long term is not the main issue: its function as a 'bosses' union' is to distract, weaken and confuse *now*, so as to drive home the post-strike advantage of the NCB.

In the coming weeks, the NUM leadership will be faced with the most difficult task in its whole history. It will be a crisis of confidence. It has to justify its very existence, and will guarantee that only if it can persuade the vast majority of its members that democracy - through conference decisions and ballots - will be strengthened locally and nationally. In doing so, it will only be reaffirming the founding principles of the old Miners' Federation and of all trade unions - that the members control their own organisation. But it will also begin to wrench back the notion of 'democracy' away from the Thatcher ideology.

No doubt it will need an imaginative and careful 'save the NUM' campaign in Nottinghamshire, involving the whole labour and democratic movements. It may not need a special rules conference, only clear public assurances and commitments from the President. Such assurances would be for the membership, not for the leaders of the breakaways. These are but small concessions and not even made to the 'class enemy'. The result will be to unite the membership and save the NUM. There is no other choice. Marxists have always recognised the necessity of compromise. The NUM does not have the luxury of another eleven years to reunite itself. D

³ John L Lewis was president of the UMWA from 1919 to 1960 during which time he was a dominant force in American politics. See M Dubofsky and W Van Tine *John L Lewis; A Biography* (1977).

COAL NOT DOLE. VIDEOS OF THE STRIKE

The Northern Film & TV. Archive are currently publishing a catalogue of video tapes produced by independent film and video makers in solidarity with the miners during the 1984-85 strike.

Of the 35 video tapes listed in the catalogue, 15 are available for hire or sale from the Archive itself. The others can be obtained directly from the producers (addresses and telephone numbers supplied.) Also in the catalogue are lists of contacts for photographic collections/exhibitions, books and plays about the strike.

THE CATALOGUE WILL BE AVAILABLE AT THE END OF AUGUST.

If you would like to order a copy of the catalogue, to hire or buy the video tapes, or to get more information contact: Sue Kennedy or Belinda Williams, the Northern Film & TV. Archive, 36 Bottle Bank, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear, NE82AR. Tel: 091 477 3601.

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The appointment is for initial three-month period with a possible extension to April 1986.

The PORG is based on the Cities of London and Westminster Trades Council so we are looking for a committed trades unionist.

Closing date for applications will be August 20th. Further information from Cathy Lloyd, PORG, 9 Poland St., London W1V 3DG. (ph. 01-734 5831)

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