



Mid-Rhondda: testing ground for British Coal's strategy

NUM: Fight, Fight And Fight Again?

Following on the recent National Union of Nine-workers' annual conference at Rothesay in Scotland, the union leadership and the membership are faced with some very hard and unpleasant options. Parallels were inevitably being drawn with the special conference which ended the 1984/85 strike. Des Dutfield, the South Wales President, put it in a nutshell when he reminded the delegates that there would no longer be a national union had that courageous decision not been taken on March 3, 1985.

The most contentious issue now facing the NUM is the pervasive and rapid introduction of the 'Wheeler Plan', which quite simply argues that in the atmosphere of increasing international competition and greater capital investment, the industry will have to use its installed capacity more fully and more effectively to reduce costs. The objective is to reduce further manpower and increase the number of hours and days that coal is produced.

The NUM's response has been slow, understandable, predictable. Conference called for the rejection of the 'Wheeler Plan'. How this is to

be carried out is difficult to envisage given that it has been introduced in different ways, in *all* coalfields, with heavy-duty faces, continuous coal-winding, quietly negotiated variations in wage payments and, rumour has it, changes already in shift patterns. The storm over the Margam Mine six-day coaling has served only to obscure the wider and more important changes already happening.

British Coal's strategy now appears to be to switch from proposing changing work patterns in future pits to attempting to change them in existing pits - or impose closure.

It is interesting to note that in the Soviet coal industry, substantial changes have recently been made with the introduction of flexible working. There are now 360 days of production (compared with 250 days previously). Output has increased from 718m tons (1985) to 742.8m tons (1986). There are four working shifts, six hours each, and 10 days of leisure every month. All this has been achieved with full consultation and approval of the Soviet Miners' Union. Changes are therefore occurring world-

wide: some sensible, with goodwill on all side's, others as in Britain in an atmosphere of bitterness and disunity.

The great fear throughout the NUM is that unless it moves quickly and gets into a position of negotiation, especially over new technology, the union will be bypassed and revolutionary changes in work practices will be imposed. It has already happened with wage settlements and a draconian code of conduct and disciplinary procedures. The latter strikes at the very heart of trade union rights and civil liberties. The decision to call for industrial action against the code indicates the seriousness of the issue.

All this of course begs the question which was studiously avoided at Rothesay. The question is *unity*, raised quietly but persistently by

Centre for Policy Studies) of hiving off even the coal industry. Add to this the whirlwind of flexible working throughout the British economy and it all points to the NUM's growing impotence and isolation. A statement by National President Arthur Scargill about Wapping being a picnic by comparison if the UDM tried to organise Margam, sent a chill down the spine of many a miner and further indicated the bankruptcy of current nihilistic thinking.

There were plenty of such brave words on all kinds of issues at Rothesay, but no one was prepared to grasp the nettle of disunity with the breakaway Union of Democratic Mineworkers. The rhetoric of 1984-85 continues to prevent clear thinking. A willingness to adopt Lenin's dictum 'Manoeuvre, temporise, compromise' (*Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, 1920 p58) for the sake of rebuilding unity in the service of the members and their communities would not go amiss.

Privatisation, imposed work practices, imposed wages and disciplinary procedures: these are the very issues around which unity can be built. Will the new NUM leadership rise to the occasion, draw the union and the industry back from the brink and provide a credible alternative strategy embracing all other energy workers and the wider community? Terry Thomas, a South Wales delegate, in the course of the so-called 'Margam' debate on the five-day week, pointedly remarked that the leadership had provided plenty of questions but precious few answers to the complex and growing problems now facing the union.

He may have been reflecting on the seemingly bland yet deeply profound slogan on the old Seven Sisters NUM lodge banner: 'Policy, Leadership, Unity'. And the ghosts of Cook, Horner and Paynter at Rothesay will have been whispering: 'And the greatest in that trinity is Unity. What is to be done now?' •

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Scargill: warning over Margam

the now retired national vice-president of the NUM, Michael McGahey - hopefully not the last of a long line of intellectuals in the NUM leadership.

As wages and conditions are imposed, how long will members remain loyal to this 'great union'? It became 'great' because it was *effective* in defending its members and that effectiveness was achieved through hard-won unity. All of this is now compounded by the return of a Conservative government pledged to further privatisation, especially of the electricity supply industry, and giving dark hints (via the