

THE MINNERS'

STRIKE

AT 44



a ★ Morning Star commemorative supplement

HOW THE GREAT STRIKE BEGAN

HILARY CAVE was at the heart of the National Union of Mineworkers administrative apparatus at its headquarters in Sheffield from 1983 to 1988.

As national education officer she ran training courses preparing union activists for what the union knew was coming – an all-out attack by the Tory government of Margaret Thatcher on the miners and their union.

Evidence of the government's plans had been leaked years earlier. The Ridley report, which was produced in 1977, was a blueprint for the privatisation of Britain's nationalised industries – automotive, steel, rail, electricity, the coalmining industry and others – and the destruction of their unions.

The report was prompted in part by the 1974 miners' strike which brought down prime minister Ted Heath's Conservative government.

During the 1974 strike, which had seen power cuts and a three-day working week, Heath had called a general election and asked the public: "Who rules Britain?"

The voters had responded with a resounding: "Not you!"

Tory MP Sir Nicholas Ridley, whose family fortune had been made off the backs of coalminers before nationalisation in 1947, was a leading figure in the Selsdon Group, a neoliberal, free-market lobby within the Conservative Party.

His 1977 report had been prepared in anticipation of the election of a Conservative government. The report recognised that to achieve its goals of privatising Britain's nationalised industries a Tory government would have to take on the unions in those industries, and that the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) would be the biggest challenge.

Hilary Cave said: "The report did not necessarily concentrate on the mining industry but other industries too, like electricity. But

Britain's coalfields were already seething with anger and lightning walkouts when the national strike against pit closures was triggered at Cortonwood colliery in Yorkshire on March 6 1984. PETER LAZENBY reports

it wanted to smash the unions. It was quite explicit.

"We knew that the coalmining industry was under threat. We knew that pits were already being shut and that the government was interested solely in the bottom line; that nationalised industries should make a profit and then be privatised."

Ridley became a cabinet minister in Margaret Thatcher's 1979 government. By 1983 the government was already closing pits on the grounds that they were uneconomic, in some cases abandoning up to 200 years of coal reserves. NUM policy was that no pit should close on grounds other than exhaustion.

Cave said the National Coal Board was manipulating financial accounts to identify individual pits as loss-making.

"You can invest millions in a pit and on the face of it that pit is making a loss because of the investment," she said.

There were other manipulations. The publicly owned Central Electricity Board (CEGB) and its power stations was the coal industry's biggest customer.

"The price of electricity was raised by 8 per cent," she said. "Coal prices went up by 4 per cent. Electricity seemed to be making a profit and coal was making a loss."

A major aim of the overtime ban was to reduce coal stockpiles in preparation for the battle that the NUM knew was to come.



The pit closures were causing huge concern in the coalfields.

"Miners were worried. Unemployment was high. Pits were shutting and jobs were disappearing," said Cave. "That was the background and we began to prepare to save the coalmining industry."

"A special delegate conference was held in London. Delegates decided there would be an overtime ban. That was in October, 1983."

An overtime ban in the coalmining industry causes huge problems. Essential maintenance was carried out using overtime on Saturdays when no coal was being turned. Without the maintenance work coal production was delayed when miners returned to work on Monday.

"It made a lot of hassle up and down the coalfields," said Cave. "Different managers responded differently and there were sporadic bouts of strike action."

A major aim of the overtime ban was to reduce coal stockpiles in preparation for the battle that the NUM knew was to come.

"Some people said we did not prepare for the strike, but we did – with the overtime ban," said Cave.

As the overtime ban continued into 1984 tension in the coalfield mounted and miners at individual pits were responding with strike action.

"Sporadic action was already breaking out over closures," said Cave. "Scotland, Durham, Yorkshire – all sorts of action going on. It was a very unsettled situation."

The unrest came to a head when on March 6 1984, the National Coal Board announced the closure of Cortonwood colliery, near Rotherham in South Yorkshire, after more than 100 years of production.

"Cortonwood was a pit people



had been moved to because it had a long future," said Cave. "The announcement came as a shock."

Cortonwood walked out and asked Yorkshire Area of the NUM for support. The NUM was made up of 16 semi-autonomous areas, mainly geographical, such as Yorkshire Area NUM, South Wales, Durham, Scotland, Leicestershire, Derbyshire, Kent.

Each was run by an NUM Area Council made up delegates from the pits in that area's coalfield.

A week after Cortonwood came out, Yorkshire Area Council met and the vote to support Cortonwood with strike action across the coalfield was unanimous.

The Yorkshire coalfield was by far the biggest in Britain, with 54 pits and 56,000 miners, though pit numbers had already fallen because of closures. In 1978 there were 66 pits in Yorkshire, and 66,000 miners – evidence of the extent of the closures programme in the Yorkshire area.

Pickets from Yorkshire went into other coalfields.

A special delegate conference of the NUM was held in Sheffield on April 19. By then the strike was already widespread and the delegate conference was lobbied by thousands of miners who were already on strike calling for it to be made official.

The delegate conference did exactly that and called on all miners to support it. But the fact was that the strike had already started – from the bottom up.

Cave said: "It was clear that the popular will was for strike action to defend jobs and communities."

A fight to defend our industry and our communities

Durham Miners Association chair STEPHEN GUY explains how the legacy of the strike lives on in north-east England with the miners' gala in July and the under-refurbishment 'Pitman's Parliament'

THE MINERS' STRIKE OF 1984-85 was an industrial dispute often considered a "battle," involving 184,000 miners, their communities, the state, including most of the British media, the National Coal Board (NCB) and the Tory government, led by Margaret Thatcher.

The dispute was not about pay and conditions but rather a fight to preserve an industry, communities and a way of life. For decades, coalmining in Britain was the backbone of the economy, not least in north-east England, employing hundreds of thousands of people, hence the importance of victory in the struggle.

By any measure, the 1984-85 miners' strike was a pivotal moment in British history and had no parallel in terms of its duration, size or impact, which continues to endure across many workplaces and communities.

Without doubt, the National Union Mineworkers (NUM) was considered one of the most powerful and politicised trade unions with a recent history in the 1970s of winning industrial conflicts, often humiliating central governments.

Thatcher was determined to curtail or even prevent unions from exercising their collective powers and knew that if she defeated the NUM, then she would have removed the vanguard of the trade union and labour movement.

The sheer determination of the then government is evidenced by the deployment of police, in their thousands, in the pit villages of Durham, based on large-scale military operations, declaring a state of emergency, and the expenditure – estimated at £6 million in 1985 – used by the Tory government during the bitter 12 months commencing March 6 1984.

Nationally, more than 11,000 arrests were made and more than 8,000 people were charged, mostly

for breach of the peace, simply for seeking to preserve jobs and communities.

Thatcher's government even invoked amendments to legislation that prevented the dependants of miners from accessing social security benefits, as they had been entitled to during the strikes of the 1970s. This move was a deliberate and barbaric attempt to starve our members back to work.

Heroic women's support groups that emerged in 1984-85 faced off Thatcher's attempts to starve miners and their families. Their collective endeavour in the soup kitchens and their fierce determination on the picket lines to support the struggle, standing shoulder to shoulder with their men, will never be forgotten.

March 3 1985 saw the end of the strike. Striking miners, proud but angry, were cheered and clapped as they and their families, with their heads held high, marched back to work with their lodge banners and brass bands. NUM members and their families had endured 12 months of hardship, but the hardship and suffering didn't end in 1985, as a visit to any of the pit villages or towns across the Durham coalfield will reveal.

The coalmines of Durham were the beating hearts of communities. Mining had provided generations with a steady income, homes for life and a strong sense of belonging. A whole culture and identity had grown around coalmining in Durham, and with the loss of the mine, much of the cultural activities and infrastructure that had grown around it – from brass bands, to working men's clubs to NCB-sponsored sports and leisure facilities – disappeared along with it.

The loss of the coal industry in north-east England caused devastation across large swathes of

the our region, and some villages are still desperate for support to recover having been left behind by successive governments.

Thatcher's government even invoked amendments to legislation that prevented the dependants of miners from accessing social security benefits

Despite the fact that 40 years have passed since the start of the strike, memories remain vivid and emotions run high. Division between striking miners and scabs still exist and are unlikely to ever be repaired. Supporters of the 1984-85 strike are organising numerous events to mark the occasion across Britain. The topic of the strike will be a prominent feature at the 138th Durham Miners' Gala on July 13 and will allow former striking miners, their families and supporters to gather, reminisce and protest as the country builds towards a general election. Jobs, infrastructure, better schools, housing and transport for former left-behind communities will be top of the agenda.

The Durham Miners Association's (DMA) current leadership know that it is not wise to simply rely upon governments to deliver for our towns and villages. We now offer support to our communities through advice surgeries and representation before social security tribunals, and engage in local, regional and national consultations on matters that affect our people to ensure their voices are heard. History

teaches us that the DMA, and the communities it has served since 1869, have it within their gift to initiate programmes of work to enhance our lives. There is no better example than the DMA-created charity Redhills, tasked not only to refurbish the Pitman's Parliament but to reach out to our communities and work with them to unlock potential cultural and economic regeneration.

Redhills was once the democratic heart of the Durham coalfield. A place where the matters of industry were debated and decided upon by those who were most directly affected – and action taken at a local level.

Community life and wellbeing above ground were given the same consideration as safety below ground. Miners came together to organise and create things that wouldn't otherwise be available to their communities – healthcare, housing, reading rooms, sports grounds and welfare halls with stages for performance in each one.

Now the Pitman's Parliament will come to life with the sounds of debate once again. These debates will not be led by miners but the young people of County Durham – coming together to learn from our inspirational past and gain the skills to help shape their own futures, possibly to become leaders themselves who can influence and deliver for our proud people.

THE MINERS' STRIKE AT



THE MINERS' STRIKE AT 40

We want to hear from you...

We know that many of our readers, their friends and family were personally affected by the 1984-85 strike. The Morning Star is a record of the working class, its highs and lows, how we work together in our workplaces, our trade unions and our communities.

Let's get your memories of the strike on record. Use our dedicated new email address miners@peoples-press.com.

Were you at school – how did it affect your education? Did you collect money for the miners? Tell us what you did and what happened.

We know that Wham! played their first gig at a fundraiser for the miners – but did you attend? Do we have readers and supporters' groups that were involved, what about your Labour or Communist Party branch? Were you involved with a trades council at the time? Did your union branch raise money, how did it show solidarity?

Do you have a collection of memorabilia – T-shirts, badges, flyers, posters? Why not take a picture and send it in with a few words about how it all started.

It is so important that the Morning Star continues to showcase the real stories of the strike. We were the only national daily paper that stood by the miners throughout the dispute and from the current media's reflections being shown on our TVs, that is still the case.

Don't keep this request to yourself – do pass it on to others who would be interested. Let's ensure that our record of this strike the ramifications of which are still felt today are of the people who matter, we the working class.

One-Day Conference

Essex and the Miners' Strike

**Saturday March 9
10am to 3pm**

Friends Meeting House
Chelmsford, CM1 2QL



Registration free
via Eventbrite

A one-day conference to mark
the 40th anniversary of the Great
Strike of 1984-85

Communist Party of Britain



National executive committee

"Fellow trade unionists, you are part of a mighty labour movement, whose power lies in its unity and its democratic methods. Today that unity is in danger. The principles and methods of trade unionism are at stake and, thereby, our livelihood and our hopes of a better future. Stand firm against these attacks ... Stand firm."

Miners' leader ARTHUR HORNER, 1948

Britain's Communist Party salutes the miners, their families, trade union and supporters who fought so tenaciously in 1984-85 to defend jobs and local communities.

Together, they resisted the forces of the British state and ruling class, writing a proud chapter in the struggle for working-class dignity and power. Let us never forget the lessons:

- * Britain's ruling class is ruthless in defence of its interests at home and abroad
- * Only a united, militant and politicised working class and its allies will overthrow capitalism
- * Strong unions and a powerful Communist Party are vital for social progress and socialist revolution

Rob Griffiths
General Secretary

Carol Stavris
Women's Organiser

Ruth Styles
Chair

CPB, Ruskin House, 23 Coombe Rd, Croydon CR0 1BD
office@communist-party.org.uk 020 8686 1659
[facebook.com/CPBritain](https://www.facebook.com/CPBritain) communist-party.org.uk

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STRIKE MEMORIES

The momentous miners' strike of 1984-85 affected hundreds of thousands of lives – miners, their families, support groups and thousands of individuals who fought by their side. Here the Morning Star prints three memories from people who were there

The Morning Star wants to hear more of the stories of those people who fought so courageously. We'll be publishing them throughout the next 12 months, the 40th anniversary year of the miners' epic struggle. Send your story to us at miners@peoples-press.com.



Nicola Jayne Ingram, miner's daughter, Elsecar colliery, near Barnsley, South Yorkshire

I WAS seven when it was the miners' strike and I knew that there was something going off that was pretty bad. There was a fella across the road from us that was scabbing but I had fond memories of it really.

I remember standing on a coal stack at Barrow pit cos my dad and his mate Fred were nicking coal. So I'd stand and if I saw a car coming I'd have to shout "Dad" then we'd leg it.

One of my fondest memories was when we went to the soup kitchen at the miners' welfare at Worsborough. It was a bit of a walk away but we never got the bus cos we couldn't afford it.

We'd go as a family as my brother was a striking miner as well and he'd got kids my age. We'd play with other kids and the food was amazing even though my mam's food was amazing but in that year we were kinda eating chips and egg a lot.

I remember Mrs Scargill serving us a lot who I now know as Anne. You knew she was important. One Christmas she served us and she announced that we had got some gifts from Africa. My gift was a pinball machine. It had a crack right down the middle of it, but I didn't care. I was like 'this is from Africa and it's amazing' so even though the miners' welfare was very poignant to me, we as kids just used to have fun.



Eve Robertson, miner's daughter, Cortonwood colliery, South Yorkshire

I HAVE always believed that if you were born into a mining community you are "coal-grown."

It runs through your body like it does a seam. Mine is a "silkstone" seam, as my father and maternal grandfather worked at Cortonwood pit in Yorkshire, one of the first five pits to be announced for closure, which prompted the '84-5 strike.

I turned seven during that year, my dad was treasurer of Cortonwood NUM branch at that time. I still have conflicting feelings, mainly because that year I hold so many happy emotional memories – Lenny Henry's shoes on our kitchen table ready to be raffled off, saying goodbye to Dad before his march to TUC in Brighton, my Christmas present of a pottery wheel from French miners – yet I learned to grow up a little too quickly from the things I saw and heard.

The phone that was tapped, an unmarked police car outside my house, my mother too proud for the soup kitchens, the arguments, my father getting money from the treasury to throw a quid here and there to picketing miners.

During the strike year I was held proud on my father's shoulders during demonstrations, walked proudly behind our banner, wore his cap full of union badges, told to listen carefully to what Tony Benn was saying.

I loved hearing my father's union debates with fellow strikers. But then, after that year the financial devastation struck hard. The mental stability of my parents even harder and along with job relocations to mines that remained open for the time being brought not new camaraderie but fear and mistrust and polarised thinking. She did a good job didn't she, Thatcher! She split us right open.

What the strike taught me though was to never trust the Met Police, the media or a single soul who thinks it's OK to cross a picket line.



Joan Heath (left), Carole Denny (right)

IN THE 1980s I lived in Liverpool; later Rochdale, where unemployment was similarly high; available work was often very short term.

I and my partner moved to Hebden Bridge, becoming active in the Labour Party, and contributing to the miners' support group. During that period Thatcher infamously described the miners as "the enemy within."

In Hebden Bridge the miners' strike was well supported. There were few jobs but I put energy into our Labour Party branch and collecting for striking miners. The Trades Club in Hebden Bridge became a collection point for tinned food and other items for solidarity. Volunteers delivered such to the striking miners at Denby Grange Colliery. I and my friend Carole Denny, became further involved, on one occasion taking several buses and negotiating a muddy field to reach the picket line, where we were well received. Following this, Carole and I doubled our efforts, going house to house requesting donations of tins.

One occasion comes back. Having a routine, and gaining more confidence, knocking on doors became easier, except for one occasion. I remember it was a sunny day, and – as was usual – people in Hebden were pleased to help. One door was opened by a young woman, and we could see there was little in her front room. I thought perhaps she had not lived there long.

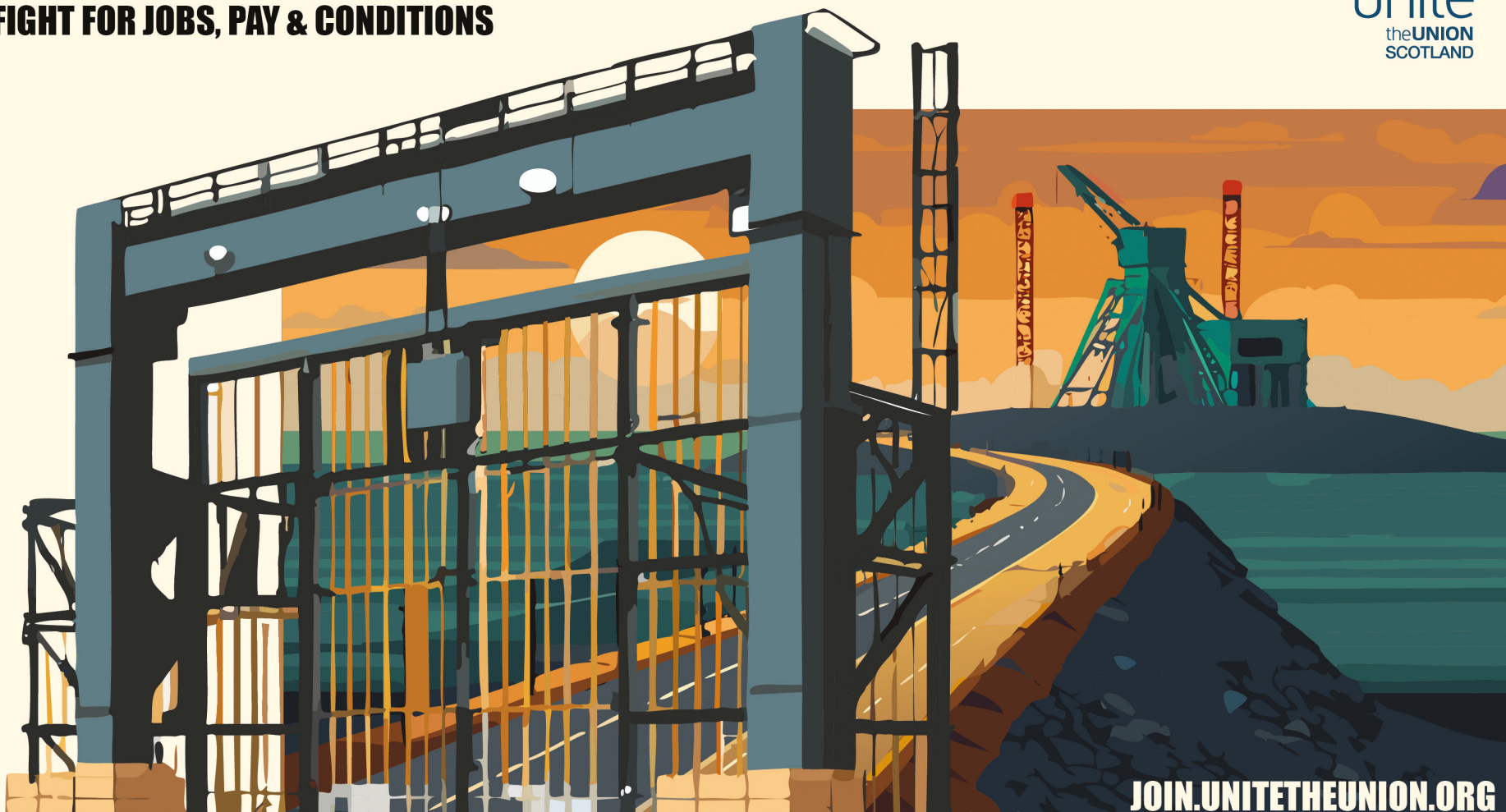
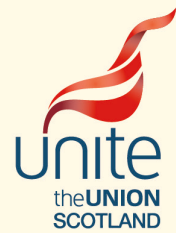
We explained ourselves; asking if she might have a tin or two. The woman said she was keen to give support and went to a cupboard. Inside we saw there was one tin. She took it out and handed it to us with a smile. We stood there for a moment, and then told her we could not possibly take her last tin and handed it back. We explained we already had plenty of tins for today; she had only one. She continued to smile and said that she was fine, and really wanted to support the miners. She pushed the tin back into my hand determinedly. That, in particular, stayed with me.

THE MINERS' STRIKE AT



WE HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN

FIGHT FOR JOBS, PAY & CONDITIONS



Unite North West



Solidarity to all trade unionists marking the 1984 miners' strike — we have not forgotten

Ritchie James
Regional Secretary

George White
Regional Chair



Unite South East

Sends solidarity and greetings to all involved in the 1984 miners' strike on the 40th anniversary of that struggle

Joe Bleach
Regional Chair

Bob Middleton
Regional Secretary

THE NEOLIBERAL BACKDROP TO THE MINERS' STRIKE

LORD JOHN HENDY KC explains how the events of '84-5 were an ideological assault unleashed on the working class in revenge for gains of the '70s

THE MINERS' STRIKE of 1984-5 really began in 1947 when Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman and others developed a quasi-philosophical theory to justify the unbridled capitalism of the 19th century. It became known as neoliberalism.

Ironically, 1947 was the year the British coalmines were nationalised, part of the "post-war consensus." Neoliberalism rejected every aspect of it – from nationalisation to the welfare state and, in particular, the dominant economic theory which underpinned the consensus and mitigated the harshest aspects of capitalism, Keynesianism. Neoliberalism has many features but of most relevance here is the proposition that trade unions are tolerable – except to the extent that, through collective bargaining, they distort the so-called "labour market." The price of labour should instead be left to the freedom of individuals to compete against each other to work for the lowest wage each is prepared to accept to sustain life.

Over the decades, neoliberal doctrine became extraordinarily influential among the right. It was put into effect by Augusto Pinochet in Chile after the CIA-assisted coup in 1973. Margaret Thatcher, elected prime minister in 1979, adopted its creed (as did Ronald Reagan the year after).

The 1970s are highly significant. The '70s were the most equal British decade ever in terms of wealth and income. The share of national income taken by the top 0.1 per cent of the population has never been lower than in 1978. The share of GDP going to wages rather than profits was never greater than in 1976.

Neoliberalism provided an intellectual justification to reverse that.

Policies were adopted to transfer much heavy industry and manufacturing (and some services) to cheap-labour economies; public services were privatised and parts of public and private undertakings were outsourced; deregulation became the order of the day. Such policies also ended or undermined collective agreements and the "distortion of the labour market." The government abandoned the promotion of collective bargaining (policy since 1896). It encouraged derecognition and relished the "monstering" of trade unions and trade unionists by the right-wing press.

A significant rise in unemployment was engineered to drive the price of labour down. Increasingly harsh conditions for social security were imposed. Thatcher asserted "there is no such thing as society" to counter working-class solidarity and broke up communities by the sale of council housing and the

removal of rent controls.

A plan was in development to emasculate trade unionism, disempower workers and increase managerial prerogative. Partly this was to be done by new anti-union legislation, partly in another way. There had been a failed dress-rehearsal of the legislative route in 1971 with the Industrial Relations Act – beaten by working-class power, the shop stewards' movement, uncowed union leaders and the freeing of the Pentonville dockers in 1972 (under threat of a general strike).

The government wanted revenge, in particular for the success of the miners' strike earlier that year. The wrongful prosecution and conviction of the Shrewsbury pickets later in 1972 (finally vindicated in 2021) illustrates their attitude. They became even more incensed about the miners' strike of 1974, on which Ted Heath staked and lost the general election. Part of the strategy was to emasculate trade unions by legislation; this time slice by slice thus avoiding the showdown that followed the 1971 Act.

The other strategy was to break a major union in an engineered major set-piece strike. This was set out in a Confidential Annex to the Ridley Report on privatisation of June 1977. It considered several unions the government might take on but "the most likely area is coal."

It proposed that coal should be stockpiled and imported through non-union ports; hauliers should recruit non-union lorry drivers; power stations should be adapted for burning oil and coal; strikers' benefits should be cut; and a large, mobile squad of police should be equipped.

In November 1977 the "Stepping Stones" report outlined the propaganda war to be fought against unions. In February 1981, the government announced plans to close 23 pits across the country but was withdrawn in the face of a threatened national strike. The government was not ready. The Colliery Review Procedure (agreed with the NUM) led to closures on a case by case and the loss of 41,000 jobs between March 1981 and March 1984.

However, such an orderly rundown was not going to achieve the planned confrontation. So, the Ridley plan was put into effect. In 1983 Ian McGregor was appointed as chair of the National Coal Board (NCB) from British Steel where he had overseen the loss of 100,000 jobs. Coal stocks were built up, though the NUM instituted an overtime ban in November 1983. The government chose the date, and on March 5 1984, the NCB announced that five pits would be subject to "accelerated closure" in just five weeks. Miners at the

affected pits walked out. To ensure a wider strike, on March 6, the NCB announced that the Colliery Review Procedure was obsolete, and that 20 collieries would close, with a loss of 20,000 jobs.

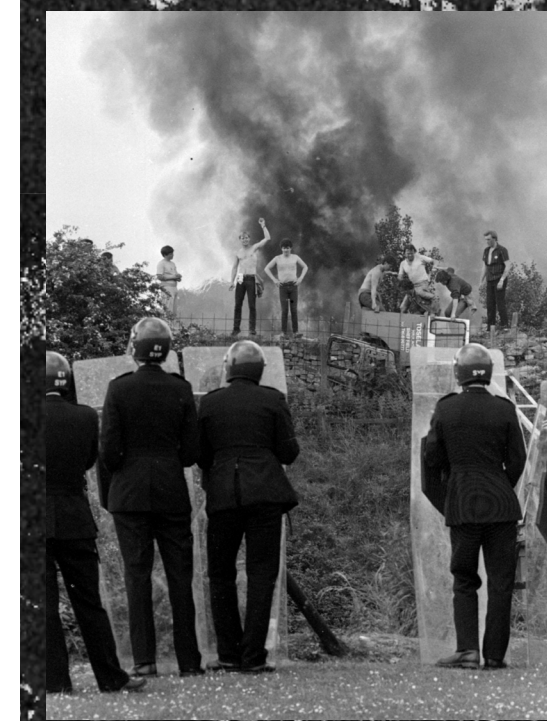
NUM president Arthur Scargill claimed that the government intended to close more than 70 pits. The government denied the claim and MacGregor wrote to every NUM member claiming Scargill was deceiving them and there were no plans to close any more pits than had already been announced. Cabinet papers released in 2014 showed that MacGregor's plan was, in fact, to close 75 pits.

This was not the only dirty trick. An agent had been infiltrated into the NUM office, the phones of officials and lawyers were tapped; a fish restaurant used by NEC members was bugged. It was alleged that Scargill had stolen a huge sum donated by the Soviet miners' union. It took years to disprove this outrageous smear. A tactic devised by MacGregor and Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer was described in his memoir: "We would try to stimulate [legal] actions which would cost Scargill so much money that it would reduce his ability to finance flying pickets ... and ... progressively tie the union up in knots."

In the multitude of legal actions which followed, I (and a superb legal team) had the honour to represent the NUM and Area unions. There is no doubt that the litigation was an inconvenience for the unions, especially when the funds of the NUM and several Area unions were sequestrated and put into receivership. But it did not end or weaken the strike.

Nonetheless, the strike was ultimately defeated and the consequences have been disastrous both for the mining communities and for the British working class. After the strike, Thatcher was able to continue the neoliberal agenda, including passing anti-union legislation to reduce union power. In consequence, today less than 25 per cent of workers have their terms and conditions set by negotiations between unions and employers (one of the lowest levels in Europe). But in the 1970s over 80 per cent of UK workers were covered by a collective agreement. That drop is the reason that real wages have not risen since 2007 and that half the UK workforce now earn less than £27,588 pa (and one quarter earn less than £16,068). More people are on benefits in work than those on benefits out of work. Some 14.4 million of our citizens live in poverty and 3.8 million in destitution. No wonder the rate of growth last year was 0.1 per cent – a figure, which has since become negative.

Such is the triumph of neoliberalism.





As we commemorate the 40th anniversary of the 1984/85 Miners' Strike we pay tribute to those who stood fast during the year long dispute. They should rightly be proud of their actions to defend our industry, communities and jobs.

We also pay tribute to those unions, organisations and individuals who supported us, and the Women Against Pit Closures movement without whose support we could not have sustained the year-long dispute.

Although 40 years have passed, many communities are still suffering from the loss of the pits.

In order to move on we must have closure.

We need an inquiry into what happened at Orgreave. Who orchestrated the plan to unleash a police riot and convict miners on false charges?

We need an end to the collective punishment still being inflicted on mineworkers, our families and mining communities through the Government's continuing extraction of billions of pounds from the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme. The pension scheme should benefit only the miners who paid into it.

Over the next 12 months there will be many events to commemorate the strike. All involved should hold their heads up with pride. We stood our ground.

Nicky Wilson

President

National Union of Mineworkers

Wayne Thomas

Vice President

National Union of Mineworkers

Chris Kitchen

General Secretary

National Union of Mineworkers