

# PERSPECTIVES ON THE MINERS' STRIKE

Reviewed by  
Chris White

**DIGGING DEEPER: Issues in the Miners' Strike**, edited by Huw Beynon. Verso Press, 1985. Paperback.

**STATE OF SIEGE: Politics and Policing in the Coal Fields**, by Jim Coulter, Susan Miller & Martin Walker. Canary Press, 1984. paperback.

**POLICING THE MINERS' STRIKE** edited by Bob Fine & Robert Millar. Lawrence and Wishart, 1985. Paperback.

**SCARGILL AND THE MINERS** by Michael Crick. Penguin, 1984. Paperback.

**N**ine thousand miners arrested. Two pickets killed. Police roadblocks, riot squads, horses, dogs. Mining communities occupied by the police, army-style. Miners' leaders jailed for picketing. Civil liberties undermined. The capitalist press relentlessly pillorying Scargill. Nightly TV debates. Scabs. Unprecedented resistance from miners' wives. Millions of pounds raised by support groups in Britain and all over the world. Bitterness, suffering, humour. Ruling class Tory obsessions and power flaunted. Destroy the union, privatise the coal industry, increase nuclear energy. Five billion pounds of public money spent. The falling pound. The starve them back strategy. Emotional scenes as thousands march back to

work, defiant and proud. The right to work, to defend jobs and mining communities. Coal not dole. The struggle continues.

It is difficult to describe the overwhelming impact that the miners' strike has had on British life. British politics will never be the same. Class struggle has been waged and witnessed on a momentous level.

For the Australian reader wishing to investigate issues beyond the images and headlines, these four books, published just before the end of the strike, are an excellent beginning. They provide penetrating descriptions of most aspects of the strike, unravel the key economic and political forces involved in the struggle and provide insights and lessons about the social experiences of the combatants involved.

Although the miners and the labour movement have suffered a considerable setback, it cannot be said that the Thatcher strategy has decisively prevailed. In the years to come, the arguments in these books will help explain why the Tories are in serious trouble.

## State Power

**T**he first section of *Digging Deeper*, *The State of Siege* and *Policing the Miners' Strike* show how this dispute, simply in opposition to redundancies, has laid bare for all to see the repressive functioning of the state apparatus against workers and their families.

The first two essays in *Digging Deeper*, "Decisive Power: The New Tory State Against the Miners" by Huw Beynon and Peter McMylor and "Let Them Eat Coal: The Conservative Party and the Strike" by Bill Schwartz provide an excellent analysis of the Tories' obsession with avenging the political defeat of the

Heath government by the miners. They show how carefully prepared were the plans for the exercise of state power and how ruthlessly and at what cost the battle was pursued. What is significant is that the Tories did not quickly succeed — if at all — and that the resistance lasted for so long.

In the introduction to *Policing*, "The Law of the Market and the Rule of Law", Bob Fine and Robert Millar link up the repressive activities of the police with the demands of the "law of the market". The dogmatic enforcement of the "right to manage", to close so-called "uneconomic" pits and make thousands of miners redundant, depended on the full power of 8,000 police and the institutions and propaganda of law and order, the flouting of the rule of law and the consequent serious weakening of accepted liberties.

*Behind the Tory slogan of the law of the market, we discover a commitment to maximising the rate of profit and minimising the influence of workers and the public on how surplus is produced and distributed; a view encapsulated in the idea of the "right of management to manage". Behind the Tory version of the rule of law, we find an equally anti-democratic commitment to maximising the power of the state at the expense of democratic forms of organisation within and without the state and of the civil liberties of individual citizens.*

*Given the power of the labour movement and the liberal vestiges which remain within the state machinery and even the Tory party, the government has not been able to carry out this project without challenge. It is by no means inevitable that the drift towards*

authoritarianism will continue. It depends on a struggle between those social forces which stand in favour of democracy and those which are aligned against it. This is why the miners' strike has proved so important to civil libertarians and democrats. (p.21)

It is neither rhetoric nor exaggeration to say that every aspect of the system of law and order was used to defeat the strike.

## The Police

**T**he evidence accumulated of mass military-style policing intended not to regulate picketing, nor to guarantee peaceful picketing, but clearly aimed at stopping all picketing is impressive. Sheffield Police Watch enumerated case after case of unprovoked violence by the police in six months of systematic observation. (John McIlroy, "Police and Pickets" in *Digging Deeper*.)

The *State of Siege* contains horrifying accounts of police tactics and the miners' responses in the first five months of the strike. It tells of the massive roadblocks stopping, searching and arresting miners, the constant intimidation of mining villages, phonetapping, the sensational events of Orgreave with thousands of police, horses, dogs, and the brutal methods of arrest, of how hundreds of police would escort one scab through picket lines to a mine, the reactions of the miners to this and to the injustices of the magistrates and, above all, how the political and industrial ideas of the miners merely to resist mass sackings and to put forward their policies for expanding the coal industry were ruthlessly opposed. For generations now the image of the "friendly bobby" is gone.

*Poicing the Miners' Strike*, in a more analytical framework, describes the changes which took place in the organisation of the police force. Initially, the police force was organised at a local level but, during the dispute, it became a national force which could despatch thousands of personnel to a particular area and which used riot tactics seen only in fascist states.

## The Judiciary

**A** number of articles provide evidence of the partisan role of the judiciary. Magistrates handed out thousands of breaches of the peace, made use of ancient laws dredged up from 200 years ago, imposed restrictive bail conditions not to travel and to report daily to the police, imposed curfews. The higher courts upheld these new forms of policing, thus criminalising ordinary working men and women and making illegal normal forms of protest.

But it was in the civil law used by the working miners, the scabs, with the backing of Tory advisers and money, that the judges revelled in their Tory opinions, consistently ruling against the union and then, when the union leadership refused to agree, fining them for contempt and seizing millions of pounds of miners' property and finance. Nearly every move made by the union was met by the power of the courts to break the strike. John McIlroy has two excellent articles, one in *Digging Deeper*, the other in *Policing*, which analyse the role of the courts. Both books offer new ways of making the police accountable, of preserving the right of workers to organise in unions independently of the state, of guaranteeing the liberties of people in assembly and protest and of breaking down the authoritarian and class-based functioning of the judiciary. These issues are relevant, not just for British reformers, but for Australia.

## Welfare

**A**nother dimension of the use of the state bureaucracy is illustrated by Chris Jones and Tony Novak in "Welfare Against the Workers: Benefits as a Political Weapon". The Tories made sure that welfare benefits were denied to striking miners to attempt to "starve them back". But the miners' families survived on their own resources and an alternative national and international network sustained them for a year in food, clothing and morale.

## The Media

**T**he strike dominated every daily newspaper and every radio and TV broadcast for a year. The gutter press went over the top consistently with personal attacks on

the striking miners and on Scargill. A Murdoch rag printed a photo of Scargill waving and alleged this was a fascist salute (here the print workers took industrial action). This constant mass media exposure was critical for the Tory strategy, distorting and highlighting the "violence", reducing the dispute to personalities and creating an environment hostile to the striking miners and favourable to the Coal Board.



## The Union Movement

**T**he books do not dodge the hard issues for the union movement. The issue of no national ballot was constantly used by the Tories against the union leadership.

Huw Beynon, in the introduction to *Digging Deeper*, suggests that the decision not to hold a ballot was a tactical mistake. Michael Crick's book on Scargill gives much of the background to this issue. But the arguments by Peter Heathfield, the new dynamic general secretary of the NUM, are put with conviction. *It cannot be right for one man to vote another man out of a job; that a ballot on wages is a ballot which everyone enters on an equal basis and everyone is affected by equally; on jobs it is a different matter, especially when the jobs are at risk in some areas and not others.* (p. 13)

Two essays in *Digging Deeper* criticise the failure of most of the unions to deliver by upholding the TUC policy, and the vacillation of the

Labour Party leadership. In "Trade Unionism in Crisis: The Challenge to Union Democracy", Bob Fryer analyses the weaknesses in union resistance to the savage anti-union laws of the Tories and the ineffectiveness of the TUC. In "Where's Ramsay MacKinnock?", David Howell rips into the labour leadership, making uncomfortable parallels with Labour in 1926.

## The Women

**T**owards the end of *The State of Siege*, and in essays in the other books, the courageous, innovative and energetic miners' wives and the many support groups are given centre stage. Here is the real reason why the strikers struggled and survived for so long. After the strike, I attended an International Women's Day rally held by the Women Against Pit Closures, where 10,000 women defiantly declared that the struggle would continue, and demonstrated that their lives had been radically transformed.

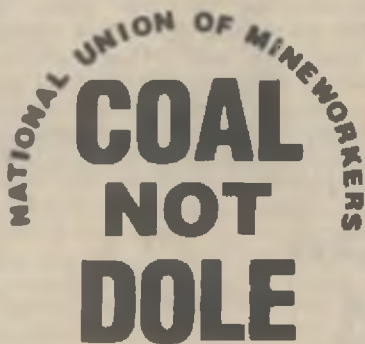
An illustration of this is given in *Policing* in "Women and the Strike: It's a Whole Way of Life". In the first weeks of the strike, the capitalist press tried to drum up opposition among the wives. The opposite occurred. Thrown together initially to talk about the hardships, the women established soup kitchens, food distribution centres and fund raising activities in each village. But soon they broke out of their traditional roles and demanded to be involved in picketing and speaking. The men in the union said it was too dangerous and their job. But an autonomous women's organisation was formed which organised pickets and mass demonstrations of women; the women developed political skills and the confidence to fly overseas to explain the strike.

The family and social roles of women in the mining communities have been irrevocably altered. A typically male bastion, the NUM was forced not only to acknowledge that the wives were the backbone of the strike, but that they were equal partners in industrial and political organisation. Like the women of Greenham Common, the miners' wives are now carved into history as an international symbol.

## Support Networks

**I**n "Beyond the Coalfields: The Work of the Miners' Support Groups", Hilary Wainwright and Doreen Massey describe an aspect of the strike, ignored by the capitalist media, which involved innovative organisational forms of solidarity, the creation of a network of active supporters in every city and town in Britain.

Throughout the strike, benefits raising thousands of pounds were held; food, clothing and necessities were collected, transported and distributed and anti-Thatcher meetings were held connecting the miners' struggle with many others. Long-standing barriers of a formerly



male chauvinist tradition were broken down. Miners learned about the oppression of gays as gay support groups gave concrete support. Peace camps, local council service groups, environmentalists, health workers and teachers were active in collecting money and offering support. The notion of "twinning", whereby southern towns adopted northern coal pits, led to the development of personal contacts and political awareness, as well as the provision of material sustenance.

These experiences had an important bearing on an old divisive argument inside the left about the way forward to socialism, characterised rather crudely as the

blue collar class struggle versus the social movements.

*But what the miners' strike has shown is that the traditional institutions of labour can be superseded and challenged without abandoning class politics. It has shown that it is not a question of either industrial action or the new social movements, nor is it one of just adding the two together. What is important is a recognition of a mutual dependence and a new openness to influence, of the one upon the other. What this strike has demonstrated is a different direction for class politics. New institutions can be built through which class politics can be seen as more than simply industrial militancy plus parliamentary representation.* (p. 168, Wainwright and Massey.)

## Control of Energy

**W**hat were the underlying reasons for an initial 20,000 miners being thrown onto the unemployment scrapheap and the decimation of the mining communities of Kent, Scotland and Wales? Colin Sweet in *Digging Deeper*, "Why Coal is Under Attack: Nuclear Powers in the Energy Establishment", provides some of the answers.

*For the present government, faced with increasing dependence on coal and a resolute trade union with a militant leadership, breaking the miners has become more than a key issue. It has become an obsession.* (p.201). The Energy Establishment and the Tory government are embarking on no less a strategy than dismantling forty years of the nationalised coal and electricity industry. *The run down of coal and the build up of nuclear power is central to this exercise. The next stage will be to privatise at least the most profitable parts of both industries (coal and electricity).* (p.202)

Mrs Thatcher's powerful backers, the giant transnational corporate oil and energy interests could make millions of pounds and control of the nation's energy be transferred into their private hands.

*Thus the private interests of giant corporations mesh with the requirements of the state. These requirements dictate that the state has available: 1. a centrally controlled*

energy supply that is proof against external forces — be they militant trade unionists, consumer pressures, environmental pressures or whatever; 2. a protected civilian fuel cycle capable of supplying the nuclear needs of the military. (p.203)

When Arthur Scargill says the strike is over but the struggle will continue, you can begin to appreciate what he means.

## Scargill

**B**ut what of Arthur Scargill? In complete contrast to the other books, Michael Crick, a TV journalist, has focussed on the most dynamic socialist trade union leader seen for many years. *Scargill and the Miners* is a most readable short history of Scargill's life, his rise to the presidency, some of the inside developments of the NUM from the '50s into the '80s when the left was voted in, and the strike itself.

This is, in true journalistic fashion, a book about the man. As a youth of 15, Scargill "decided that the world was wrong and I wanted to put it right, virtually overnight if possible". It described his first days down the mine, the influence of his communist father, the Young Communist League, his fights for better conditions for the miners and the battles with the rightwing leadership. He was elected as pit delegate, as compensation officer and became prominent at NUM conferences. The famous Sallley Gates incident in Birmingham is described, when thousands of workers went on strike in solidarity with the miners (unlike in 1984) and marched to a mass picket, with Scargill organising, which divided and weakened the then Tory Heath government. The significance of the fight against redundancies is made clear by the fact that Scargill won 78 percent of the vote to become president in 1982 on such a program and the left won control of the executive.

Few political figures in this country arouse such strong feelings as Arthur Scargill. Those who dislike Scargill often positively detest him. And yet, among his own supporters he is almost worshipped. To the young men on the miners' picket lines he is like a pop star. They have trust in him, and a respect for him, that no other British trade union leader or politician in living memory has

enjoyed. Rank and file activists in the labour movement snare that adulation.

I attended a number of Scargill rallies and heard 10,000 sing the battle cry "Arthur Scargill, Arthur Scargill, we'll support you evermore".

This level of support continued even after the return to work. Two weeks after the end, Scargill contrasted the 1984 strike with 1926 when the miners went back to work cowed to lower wages and longer hours. *In 1985 at the end of the most historic strike seen, Britain's miners marched back to work having seen the 1984 closure program not implemented, five pits still open, a new procedure giving an appeals body on closure intact, and above all this union refusing to acquiesce to the closure of pits on the grounds of so-called economics. That's not defeat, that's victory as far as this union is concerned.* (to rousing cheers)

As this review is completed, just before Easter 1985, the miners, despite having suffered a setback, are still a force; the British economy under the Tories is severely strained; opinion polls indicate that Thatcher's position on the strike and her policies are causing divisiveness; and the Labour Party is in front. History may judge the strike as not so much of a defeat for the miners after all.

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The pressing need to construct the "The Political Economy of Australian Capitalism" or more precisely to map out the complex pattern of Australian class relations remains. This mapping requires labour and capital history as the necessary condition. An informed socialist politics that engages with the pattern of Australian commodity relations is still in its infancy. One precondition of a potential hegemonic socialist political strategy is a set of appropriate responses to Australian circumstances. Socialist writings of which capital history is an important part is valuable, not because theoretical analysis should determine the course of political struggle. Rather, its importance lies in the effective contribution that socialist scholars can make in clarifying the important strategic issues. To this end, capital history in general, and this volume in particular, may aid the struggle to socialism: under socialism the writing of capital history would be of purely academic interest.

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