

# The Strike Weapon: Lessons of the Miners' Strike

## Introduction

This pamphlet is not about how the miners should have conducted their strike or how it might have ended differently. There are plenty of individuals and organisations which, both during the strike and since, have appointed themselves as advisers to the strikers, either counselling 'moderation' or urging tactics of senselessly heroic adventurism. The 1984-85 miners' strike is now part of working-class history – the experiences received from it are not going to disappear from the memories of those who took part. Lessons must now be learned, for if history is to be of any importance, it must be as a guide for what we do now in making the future.

We offer in this pamphlet conclusions we think should be drawn from the miners' strike. They are of importance, we believe, not only to miners but to all workers, whether they are skilled or unskilled, white collar or blue collar, in trade unions or non-unionised, supporters of the stand taken by the NUM or opponents. Members of the working class are those people in society who have to sell their ability to work to an employer in order to live. In short, workers are the vast majority of the population, who live by working for a wage or salary. You are either a capitalist – an owner of means of producing and distributing wealth (land, factories, offices, transport, media, etc.) – and can live without working by receiving unearned income; or you are dependent on a wage, a salary or state benefit, in which case you are in the working class.

Present-day society across the globe is dominated by the capitalist system. Under capitalism, all goods and services are produced to be sold for a profit. The capitalist minority who monopolise the means of life, whether through private or state ownership, are not primarily concerned about satisfying human needs, but about selling commodities on the market at a profit. There would be no profit without the labour of the working class, for if we did not apply our mental and physical energies to nature there would be no wealth produced to sell. The production of all wealth results from workers' effort, but we are paid a price for our working abilities which is less than the value of what we produce; it is this difference between the value of our labour power and the value of what we create which is surplus value, the source of profit. So, profit derives from the unpaid labour of the workers. The capitalist accumulates profit by a process of legalised robbery. It follows obviously enough that there is an inevitable antagonism of interests between the capitalists and the workers: they need to get as much as possible out of us and we need to minimise the extent to which we are exploited. Capitalism creates unceasing class struggle between workers and capitalists; strikes are one expression of that struggle.

Socialist Party of Great Britain, 1985

<b>Contents</b>	
<b>1 The State Capitalist Coal Board</b>	<b>page 2</b>
<b>2 The Role of the State</b>	<b>page 7</b>
<b>3 The Strike Weapon</b>	<b>page 11</b>
<b>4 What is the Alternative?</b>	<b>page 15</b>

## 1 The State Capitalist Coal Board

When the post-war Labour government nationalised the coal industry in 1947, they followed the same practice as previous Tory and Liberal governments had when they had nationalised industries such as the telephone system and the port of London: they accepted established property rights and *bought* the industry from its previous owners, paying them with interest-bearing government bonds.

What was involved was a buying-and-selling transaction in which the state purchased the industry more or less at its value from the coal owners. The private capitalists who had owned the industry did not lose a penny of their investments. It was merely that the form of their property-holding changed from a (relatively unprofitable) investment in coal mining to an investment in (interest-guaranteed) government bonds. In addition, the old owners were free, if they so chose, to sell their 'compensation' bonds for cash and reinvest the money for profit in some other line of productive activity. This is how the Powell Duffryn

Group, notorious in South Wales before the war, still exists to this day; the money its owners received from the Labour government allowed it to convert itself successfully from coal mining to the production of industrial boilers and other non-mining activities.

The amount of so-called compensation (in reality the purchase price) paid to the old coal-owners was colossal:

The sum of £164.66 million was fixed by the tribunal constituted under the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act, 1946, as the compensation to be paid for the 'coal industry value', but there were additional payments for other assets. This global sum for the collieries was to be apportioned among the colliery districts by a central valuation board, and district valuation boards were to determine the share due to the individual mining units. This process took a long time and the latter stages were often avoided by voluntary schemes agreed to by the colliery companies. Valuation of all the assets taken over by the National Coal Board was not completed until 1956 and the total of the compensation payments amounted to £388 million. (W. Thornhill, *The Nationalised Industries*)

On vesting day, 1 January 1947, a notice was put up outside every pit in Britain proclaiming 'This colliery is now managed by the National Coal Board on behalf of the people', a claim that was believed by many miners and their trade union leaders (some of whom took up top management posts in the NCB). But the claim was false. Certainly, the management had changed; the old owners no longer had any say in the running of the industry (which was only normal since they had sold their business, and so the right to manage it, to the new owner, the state) and this did allow some improvement in working conditions and welfare provisions. But the new management, appointed by and answerable to the state, was not there to run the coal industry 'on behalf of the people'. Far from it, as a closer look at the terms of the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act of 1946 would have revealed.

This Act set up the National Coal Board as a public corporation to manage the coal industry on a commercial basis; in other words, as a profit-seeking business. It imposed on the new management the statutory obligation to arrange the Board's finances in such a way that, taking one year with another, its income would be sufficient to at least meet what a 1961 Government White Paper described as 'all items properly chargeable to revenue', defined as 'interest depreciation, the redemption of capital and the provision of reserves' as well as operating costs.

So there was no question of the Coal Board being run as a public service producing cost-price coal to meet needs, as some naïve Labour Party supporters imagined. On the contrary, its managers were charged with making sufficient profits to:

- 1 Pay interest on capital advanced by the government for investment in coal production.
- 2 Constitute a fund which would allow the Board to invest in coal production out of its own funds.
- 3 Pay interest on the compensation bonds given to the former owners.
- 4 Constitute a fund to pay off the full value of these bonds.

In other words, the Board had to aim to achieve an income from sales that would both cover operating costs *and* leave a surplus sufficient to cover the items listed above – which is exactly what any private capitalist business has to do. In short, the NCB was set up right from the start as a capitalist enterprise.

The state purchase of the coal industry in 1947 was merely a change of formal ownership which left the industry as a profit-seeking business aiming to extract a maximum amount of surplus value from its workforce. Far from the legalised robbery of the miners being abolished, a part of their unpaid labour even went to providing interest payments and compensation for the old owners who had so ruthlessly exploited them in the past.

But it was not only the former owners who were able to draw a privileged income from the continuing exploitation of the miners. The money which the government lends the NCB for investment in coal production is itself borrowed by the government on the money market. The interest paid on this by the NCB goes towards paying the interest which the government in turn has to pay to those who lend it money, in effect to certain holders of the National Debt.

These financial capitalists get their interest even if the Coal Board makes a loss on its coal mining activities. Thus, in the financial year 1983-84 the NCB made an operating loss of £358 million, but was still required to support interest charges of £467 million – which it was only able to do thanks to a government

grant of £875 million. In other words, the government gave the NCB the money to pay the interest which the Board owed it and which it would then hand on to the financial capitalists who had lent it the money in the first place! Whatever else can be said about nationalisation, it cannot be said that it has ended the right of members of the capitalist class to draw a privileged unearned income from the unpaid labour of the wage and salary earning class.

In the event, the unforeseen competition from oil that began to bite in the 1950s meant that the Coal Board was not able to meet its profit-making obligations in full. When it became clear that the Board had no realistic chance of being able to do so, the government decided to ‘reconstruct’ the NCB’s capital and to ‘write off’ a large part of its debt. This did not mean, as it would have done if the industry had remained in private hands, that the owners lost a part of their capital. It merely meant that the debt and the interest payments on it were transferred from the NCB to the government by being added to the National Debt.

No former coal owner or financial capitalist has lost anything from the various successive capital reconstructions that the NCB has undergone. Which is another confirmation of how the nationalisation of the coal industry in no way harmed the property rights of the former owners. Quite the reverse, in fact; the state purchase of their industry turned out to be a way of saving some of their capital which they would otherwise have lost.

The managers of the Coal Board have always been required to make a profit – and a fairly large profit – over and above the costs of producing coal, even if they have not always been successful in doing so. But this has not been a question of them simply adding a percentage mark-up to costs. The price of coal, like that of all other commodities, is something ultimately fixed by the market over which the owners or managers have little control and have to accept as more or less given. It is true that in the early years of nationalisation there was a shortage of coal which would normally have allowed the Coal Board to have increased its prices but that the government, so as to keep the energy costs of the rest of capitalist industry down, prevented them from fully exploiting the sellers’ market that then existed.

But this sellers’ market was not to last. Towards the end of the 1950s the situation began to change with the arrival of cheap oil on the energy market. Oil and coal are in direct competition for heating and, above all, for burning in power stations. This meant that the price of coal became aligned with that of oil. The sellers’ market gave way to a buyers’ market. It was at this point that the concept of an ‘uneconomic pit’ made its first appearance. Previously, with the coal shortage, only pits whose coal reserves had been exhausted or become unworkable had needed to be closed.

An ‘uneconomic pit’ was above all, at this time, a pit where the costs of mining coal were above the proceeds from the sale of that coal. In other words, a loss-making pit. The logic of capitalism left the Coal Board and the government no choice: such pits had to close, as that is the way capitalism works even in nationalised industries (at about the same time Dr Beeching was wielding his axe to eliminate British Railways’ ‘uneconomic’ branch lines). And closed they were, particularly under the Wilson Labour government that came into office in October 1964 and adopted an energy policy which banked on the continuation of cheap supplies of oil and planned for a massive reduction of coal production as power stations continued to switch from coal to relatively cheaper oil.

As a result, a record number of pits were closed in a record time, devastating mining communities in South Wales, Scotland and the North East in particular, but affecting all areas to a greater or lesser degree. What the present Tory government is planning is nothing compared to the butchering of the coal industry that took place under the 1964-70 Labour government. During the five complete NCB financial years (April 1965 - April 1970) that occurred under Labour rule, no less than 223 pits were closed, with an average of one per week over the first four of these years.

*Pit Closures under Labour Rule 1964- 70*

1965-6	52
1966-7	46
1967-8	51
1968-9	55
1969:70	19
Total	223

It was this butchery that led the leaders of the NUM to realise, somewhat belatedly, that the NCB was the state capitalist enterprise it had in fact always been. Bill Paynter, former General Secretary writing in *The Miner* (November-December 1977) on three decades of coal nationalisation, correctly noted that ‘progress from private enterprise capitalism to State capitalism does not change the fundamental status of workers in society’, while Dai Francis, in a recorded interview on his retirement as Secretary of the South Wales Area of the NUM in 1976, declared that ‘there was no difference between the old ... coal-owners and the National Coal Board. They were now turning it into state capitalism ... and they had the best man they could have had at that time, to operate the acceleration of pit closures and that was Robens’ (H. Francis and D. Smith, *The Fed*).

Lord Robens, a junior Minister in the post-war Labour government that had nationalised the coal, gas, electricity and other industries, had taken over as Chairman of the Coal Board in 1961. He had in fact arrived at the conclusion that the NCB was state capitalist before the NUM leaders. Speaking to an NUM weekend school in 1968 he had declared: ‘I do not believe that in 1945 those of us who were nationalising these industries would have done it with so much enthusiasm if someone had told us then that they were going to turn into state capitalism’ (*The Times*, 1 April 1968). Of course the NCB did not ‘turn into’ state capitalism since it had been a state capitalist enterprise since its creation in 1947 – and at the time the Socialist Party did tell Labour supporters that nationalisation was state capitalism.

Changing market conditions make nonsense of all attempts to plan production under capitalism, and the Wilson government’s energy policy was no exception. After the Arab-Israel War of 1973 and the closing of the Suez Canal, oil prices began to soar as the OPEC countries exploited to the full their near-monopoly position. This meant that coal began to become competitive again. Responding once more to the logic of capitalism as relayed by the forces of the market, the government – again, ironically, a Labour government under Wilson – decided to change the energy policy and halt the decline of coal. This was the time (1974) that the much talked-of *Plan for Coal* was drawn up with its promises of a rosy future for the coal industry and job security for miners.

But, in another illustration of the unplannable nature of capitalism, 1974 also marked the beginning of the current world depression. As the crisis deepened production fell. Less industrial activity meant less demand for power and less demand for power meant less demand for oil. On top of this, the measures taken to find substitutes for oil (such as nuclear power) had begun to bite helping to break the OPEC price ring.

*Plan for Coal* was now seen to be too optimistic and an increasing number of pits became ‘uneconomic’. A first attempt was made to impose a new pit closure programme in 1981 but, in face of unofficial strike action in a number of coalfields, the government (by now Tory under Thatcher) retreated. Subsequent events have shown this to have been merely a tactical retreat to better prepare the next attempt. This was to come in the autumn of 1983 with the appointment of Ian MacGregor, fresh from butchering the steel industry on the altar of profitability as chairman of the Coal Board.

MacGregor’s terms of reference were announced in unambiguous terms to a House of Commons committee on 22 November 1983:

Although coal is one of the United Kingdom’s major natural resources, in the Governments view the justification for coal production, like that of any other business, lies in the ability of those engaged in it to earn a satisfactory return on capital while competing in the market place. The basic objective for the National Coal Board, therefore, must be to earn a satisfactory return on its assets in real terms, after payment of social grants; and this return will need to be quantified in due course.

The National Coal Board should aim to maximise its long-term profitability by securing those sales which are profitable on a continuing basis, in competition with other fuels. It should plan its marketing, production and capital investment accordingly and bring productive capacity into line with its continuing share of the market  
(*NCB Report and Accounts* 1983/4)

To bring productive capacity into line with market possibilities meant taking on the NUM which stood by *Plan for Coal* as a firm signed agreement. So, one of MacGregor’s first acts was to provoke the miners’ strike at a time and under circumstances favourable to the government (the end of winter, over three million on the dole, a re-elected government in its first year of office, coal stocks high). The aim was to break the

power of the NUM, seen as an obstacle to the application of a new pit-closure programme which, despite the promises contained in *Plan for Coal*, had been made inevitable by the deterioration of the market position of coal.

## 2 The role of the state

The use of the police as a paramilitary force was not entirely new in Britain: the sight of riot-trained, shield-carrying policemen, backed up by dogs and horses became familiar during the inner city riots of 1981, and similar tactics have been in use in Northern Ireland for the last fifteen years. Many police forces now have 'Police Support Units' or 'Special Patrol Groups' trained in riot control techniques. They are backed up by increasingly sophisticated technology that enables them to monitor selected groups of workers and provide information by means of the Police National Computer at Hendon.

But the police were not the only state agency to be employed against the striking miners. The criminal and civil courts were also brought into play. Right from the beginning of the strike, the criminal law was used against the miners, even though picketing, including secondary picketing, is not an offence in criminal law. Criminalising miners in this way meant that they were also discredited in the eyes of many fellow workers whose only information was the distorted images fed to them by the media. The High Court, despite the rhetoric about the impartiality of the law, consistently took action of an anti-working class nature, as when they sequestered NUM funds (as a result of civil court injunctions begun by working miners with financial backing from members of the capitalist class) and when they upheld the police road-block strategy and the restrictive bail policy of Mansfield magistrates court. In addition, the DHSS callously withheld £16 a week from strikers' families' benefits on the grounds that the union was paying strike pay, even though it was well known that this was not the case. And the media too consistently put out reports that focused on acts of violence and intimidation by miners whilst ignoring those perpetrated by the police, and generally acted as the mouthpiece for NCB Propaganda.

In March 1984, one week into the dispute, the Nottinghamshire police asked for and got help from other police forces around the country under the 'mutual aid' arrangements. As thousands of extra police swarmed into the Notts area, the National Reporting Centre (NRC) at Scotland Yard was activated to coordinate the policing operation. During the course of the dispute an average of 5,350 police were deployed on picketing duties with this figure rising to a peak of 8,100 at the time of the mass picket at Orgeave in June. The NRC is under the control of the head of the Association of Chief Police Officers who is accountable directly to the Home Secretary. So, local police committees who are supposed to act as the elected, local watchdogs of the police were shown to be unable to exercise any operational control over their own forces.

The police were determined to stop pickets getting to the Notts pits and they set up road blocks, of dubious legality, on the border between Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire. And as far away as the Dartford tunnel. Kent miners were stopped and prevented from travelling north, even though, at a High Court test case later in the year, the use of police road blocks was upheld only if the breach of the peace was thought to be 'imminent'. This 'intercept policy' infuriated local people who resented being stopped, asked questions, and prevented from going freely about their business. For miners the policy had more serious repercussions: many who were stopped at road-blocks insisted on their right to proceed and so were arrested for obstruction. Many had their cars deliberately damaged by vindictive police officers who smashed car windscreens with their truncheons. Others had their cars impounded.

During the months of March and April, an almost routine 'game' of cat and mouse was acted out in the small hours each morning. Miners tried to get to pits to picket without the police finding out where they were headed. Often they were outwitted by the police in ways that suggested the use of telephone taps on members of strike committees. Where miners did get to the picket and were allowed to speak to miners going into work, they were often successful in persuading them not to cross the picket line. But as the strike wore on, the police prevented pickets from getting anywhere near working miners who were whisked through the pit gates at top speed under heavy police escort.

July saw the first of the civil court action against the NUM which resulted in both National and Area NUM funds being sequestered. At the end of July, the South Wales Area of the NUM was fined £50,000 and had its funds sequestered for contempt of court. On 10 October the national union was fined £200,000 also for contempt and on 26 October the High Court stripped the union of its funds.

By the end of the strike in March 1985, a total of 9,808 people had been arrested in England and Wales, and a further 1,504 in Scotland for alleged offences arising out of the dispute (*Hansard*, 26 March 1985). Throughout the strike, miners on picket lines claimed that arrests were frequently arbitrary and indiscriminate, carried out by 'snatch squads'. The Home Office figures suggest that this was indeed the case: almost 20 per cent of those arrested were never charged. In other words, police were using their

powers of arrest to remove people from picket lines rather than as the first stage in the process of criminal prosecution. One miner from Allerton Silkstone, arrested on 22 July 1984, described how police decided what to charge him with:

A WPC in the van asked the alleged arresting officer of the charge; he said section 5 and assaulting a police officer; he rattled other offences off, the WPC said 'OK I've got enough. Don't get carried away'.

Allegations of police ill-treatment were widespread and included being forced to have fingerprints and photographs taken, not being informed of their legal rights, not having their charges read to them; and more serious allegations of physical abuse and political questioning. For example, a miner from Brodsworth, arrested at Armthorpe on 22 August 1984, described his experiences in the following words:

I was beaten about the head by a truncheon at least four times. I then fell to the ground, holding my head in my arms trying to protect myself. I was then kicked twice in the lower left-hand side of my back I moved my arms away from my head and my hands were trodden on. The riot policeman doing this asked someone, 'Should I break his fingers?'

This policy was reinforced by the activities of the courts: of those charged, 72 per cent were subjected to restrictive bail conditions (according to figures compiled by researchers at the University of Bristol) which included bans on picketing, curfews, instructions to report daily to a local police station, and orders to stay out of whole areas such as counties or coalfields. On average, arrested miners spent 118 days under these kinds of restrictions (Bristol study) before their cases were heard in court. A Leeds solicitor involved in miners' cases had this to say about the imposition of bail conditions:

I would say that it has been the general experience that the use of bail conditions was used most effectively by the Courts throughout the strike to limit any further picketing by miners who were arrested.

Many of those miners bailed under such conditions were ultimately never found guilty of any criminal offence whatsoever. Up to 5 March 1985, a total of 5,653 cases had been heard and of these 1,335 or 25.6 per cent, were acquitted. And this figure does not include many miners, especially in South Wales, who pleaded guilty to offences which they had not committed in order to avoid a lengthy trial that would keep them off picket lines and might result in higher costs to the union.

This relatively high rate of acquittals does not mean, however, that the courts were favourably disposed to striking miners brought before them. On the contrary. In addition to the restrictive bail conditions already mentioned, there is a growing body of evidence, including reports from solicitors acting for arrested miners, and from miners themselves, that the courts behaved in a prejudiced manner towards striking miners. For example, one solicitor said:

[My] most abiding memory arising out of these cases was the manner in which the local Court either organised itself, or was organised, to ensure the maximum level of convictions.

He went on to say:

I had never previously doubted the independence of the judiciary but my experiences during the miners' dispute, both at a local level and in higher courts of Appeal, has shaken my belief.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the way miners' cases were handled in the courts was the government's decision, at the request of the local magistrates, to send in stipendiary magistrates to hear miners' cases. Stipendiaries, or 'flying beaks' as they came to be known, are professional magistrates who sit alone and are noted for being much tougher than locally recruited lay magistrates. The reason given for their use was the need to clear the backlog of cases that had built up during the strike. But some solicitors have reported that in certain courts, notably Scunthorpe magistrates court, miners' cases were postponed because a stipendiary was not available to hear them, even though a lay magistrate could have done so.

In many cases even the most bigoted of magistrates had no option but to dismiss cases in view of the obviously fabricated police evidence. The stories abound of police being given 'rough dictation' by senior officers on what to put in their statements, of police claiming to have arrested a miner at a particular pit on a particular day when even official records show that the policeman giving evidence was in a different county at the time the offence was supposed to have been committed. However, it was not necessary for magistrates to find a miner guilty in order to punish him. Magistrates have the power to bind anyone over to 'keep the peace' or to 'be of good behaviour' and this became a common tactic in the courts with the prosecution often agreeing to drop all charges if a miner would agree to be bound over. It was effective because it meant that, as with bail conditions, to return to a picket line would mean almost certain arrest and the imposition of a much more serious penalty, possibly even imprisonment. Some miners were imprisoned during the dispute, many were fined and others lost their jobs as well.

By the time the strike was over the miners had experienced at first hand the way in which the coercive power of the state can be, and is, used in defence of ruling class interests. The police, the judiciary, criminal courts and civil courts, even the DHSS, were all used against the striking miners. No expense was spared: at a time when health, education and social services are being drastically cut some estimates of the cost of the miners' strike have been as high as £2,367 million. But as Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, explained to the House of Commons on 31 July 1984, it was a 'worthwhile investment' for the country – for the capitalist class that is.

That the coercive forces of the state should have been used against the striking miners, is not surprising. Governments – both Labour and Tory have used the police and even the army to break strikes many times before. Police violence against the working class is not a matter of the 'one rotten apple' in the otherwise sound barrel. Coercion is the stock-in-trade of the police. According to the official rhetoric, the police, the judiciary and the administration are neutral, above politics, impartial, interested only in upholding the rule of law. Any worker who watched the 'neutral' police escort a single working miner across a picket line, while hundreds more used violence to hold back pickets who wanted to exercise their 'right' to attempt to peacefully persuade him not to break the strike, will realise that the rhetoric conceals an ugly reality. That reality is that the function of the state – police, courts, army, civil service, government – is to defend the interests of the capitalist class and to maintain existing class relations. Where this can be done with a minimum of coercion, so much the better. Coercion and shows of force are, after all, expensive. But where this becomes impossible, or at times when it is in the interest of the capitalist class for the state to appear strong in order to deter workers from taking action against the bosses, then the full force of the state is put into operation.



### 3 The Strike Weapon

Workers are exploited under capitalism not because capitalists are wicked or excessively greedy, but because there can be no profit without the exploitation of wage labour. Strikes are necessary if workers are to prevent themselves from being driven into the ground by the never-satisfied demands of profit: as workers we must organise to defend and improve our wages and conditions of work. The strike is one of the workers' weapons and, within the confines of the profit system, is a weapon that can limit the capitalists' aims. Those who tell us not to strike 'for the good of the nation' are, whether they know it or not, mouthpieces for the good of the bosses. The wages system is an institutionalised assault on the creators of the world's wealth and we use our trade unions to defend ourselves. But we should be under no illusion that such defensive association will emancipate us from the assault: we should not kid ourselves into believing that joining a trade union or going on strike will free us from exploitation. Karl Marx understood this in 1866 when he told the International Working Men's Association (Geneva Congress) that:

The trade unions hitherto concentrated their attention too exclusively on the local and direct struggle against Capital. They have not yet completely realised their power to attack the very system of wage slavery ...

Workers have still to realise this power – to abolish exploitation and not merely to plead for the chance to be less exploited or to have the right to be employed as wage slaves.

It is our job as socialists, then, to stand with our fellow workers in their necessary battles to defend themselves, but to point out at all times that the real victory to be achieved is the abolition of the wages system. In 1886, when the miners of Northumberland and Lanarkshire went out on strike, the Socialist League (an organisation existing in the last century which had similar principles to the Socialist Party of Great Britain) issued a leaflet in which they stated that 'if you are looking for a small betterment of your own condition only – if you are content to fight this question with your sectional trades unions – then we feel it is a duty that we owe to our class and to you to show that it is a hopeless fight, *but*, if you intend to learn why we the wealth-producers are poor, and what is the remedy, – then we Socialists welcome you as comrades'. The easy way to behave when a strike is on is to shout pious slogans of support and offer to hold the strikers' coats while they get their noses bloody in an unwinnable battle. There was no shortage of such 'we're with you brothers' condescension during the 1984-85 strike from so-called Marxists on the Left who accept the Leninist doctrine that workers cannot understand more than the struggle for crumbs.

Only dishonestly could Socialists have told the striking miners that we believed in the possibility of forcing the state pit-owners to ignore the dictates of the market. We would be untrue to our revolutionary aim if we claimed for one moment that the unlikely event of a victory for the NUM would have led to anything better than a return to the routine of wage slavery. We said plainly that you cannot run the system of exploitation in the interests of the exploited and that the 'right to work' does not exist.

Suppose you are the employee of a company whose profits are falling and you are to be thrown out of a job in order that more profit can be pumped out of fewer workers. It might seem unjust, but unfortunately for you it is not a question of what is just or unjust and you will not get very far if you try to take your employer to court for putting profits before your livelihood. The hard fact is that your employer is acting rationally – or, to be more precise, he is acting in accordance with the perverse, anti-working-class rationality of the capitalist system.

And most workers would not oppose that rationality. We are all under immense pressure to conform – to see the economics and politics of capitalism as 'common sense'; to follow leaders, to live under the illusion of a 'better future' free from the inevitable effects of the contradiction between profit and need which is built in to the buying and selling system. The mass media are part of this. They are owned and controlled by the capitalist class and can confuse workers' minds turning them against their fellow workers.

The only way to destroy political illusions is to expose them logically. It is high time that three of them were exposed. Firstly, there is the widespread belief that the Labour Party stands for the interest of the workers. The NUM is affiliated to that party. After seven Labour governments we no longer need to argue that Labour *will* dance to the tune of world capitalism – experience shows that it *does*. From wage freezes to war policies, from the closure of unprofitable coal pits to the closure of hospitals and other vitally needed services, the Labour Party's record is one of service to the exploiters – in Kinnock's case, service with a

smile. The Labour Party stands for class collaboration; it believes that there should be a partnership between employers and employees and that capitalism can be managed without the nasty old class war getting in the way. In 1947 it was Labour which set up the state-capitalist NCB and told workers that the mines belonged to the public. Another Labour government will mean more of the same old partnership between the mugger and the mugged – and workers would be mugs to vote for it. Voting Labour to keep the Tories out is to jump from the frying pan into the fire.

Secondly, there is the belief, which is declining but not fast enough, that the state-capitalist countries are examples of socialism. In Poland, as in the other misnamed ‘socialist’ countries, the unions are controlled by the state bosses. In the coal-producing region of Poland, miners are still in prison for engaging in union activity independently of the government. During the miners’ strike the British capitalists increased fivefold their imports of cheap, non-unionised Polish coal. In short, the defeat of the Polish miners in their earlier efforts to form an independent trade union contributed to the defeat of the British miners. The class war is not local but international and the interest of workers in one part of the world is the common interest of all workers.

Thirdly, workers must see through the illusion that all that is needed in the class war are good generals. Leaders making militant noises are impotent in the face of a system which still has majority support – or at least the acquiescence – of the working class. At the TUC Conference in 1984 leader after leader ascended the platform, each outdoing the one before in their sloganising unity with the striking miners. Trade union leaders are good at making speeches, but their words are worth nothing as long as the majority of workers are followers who, while in many cases sympathising with the miners, were usually more realistic than their leaders and knew that capitalism is in a depression and their jobs are on the line and striking will not change very much. Instead of assuming that great leaders are needed to force the workers into combat, it must be recognised that only on the basis of class consciousness will workers show their power. Class-conscious workers will no more need leaders than the sighted need guide dogs. Workers who are politically educated will not see themselves as miners or electricians or teachers or nurses or dockers or doctors; nor will they see themselves as British or French or Russian or white or black.

Workers learn from history. Sometimes the wrong lessons are learned, sometimes wisdom for the future comes out of the failure of the past. If the 1984-85 miners’ strike has left the NUM and other workers feeling defeated and defeatist, then the wrong lesson has been learned. The reason that the miners lost was not because they demanded too much, but because, like most workers, they were after too little. Our class should not be asking for the right to be employed but organising for the abolition of the wages system; not pleading for mining communities to be left intact, but demanding the world for the workers – *all* of it for *all* of us. If the strike has left some workers simply waiting for the next strike to be played out according to the same old routine, in the hope that the strikers will be luckier next time round, then the lesson has not been learned and capitalism will continue in its miserable way, with so-called militant workers continuing to wear themselves out on the treadmill of trade unionism.

Learning the lesson requires workers to understand that they can never win decent lives out of capitalism. It is a hard realisation: no matter how many times you strike you will always go back a wage slave; no matter how sincere or radical a government you elect, its job will always be to supervise your exploitation; no matter how many reforms are passed, the same old problems will be afflicting you and your fellow workers; no matter how many policeman’s hats are knocked off, the state will continue to possess the power of coercion on behalf of the privileged minority against the wealth-producing majority; no matter whether capital is owned and controlled privately or by the state, it will always rob you; no matter how much ‘better off’ the workers become, we will never be as well off as we could be in a classless society. In short, as long as we are wage slaves competing in the game of trying to make slavery more tolerable, our defeats will be many and our victories will not really be victories at all.

This does not mean that workers should sit back and do nothing. Within capitalism the trade-union struggle over wages and conditions must go on. But once we have learned the lesson, it becomes clear that this is a secondary, defensive activity. The real struggle is to take the means of wealth production and distribution – the factories, farms, offices, mines etc. – into the common ownership and democratic control of the entire world community. Once we possess the means of living and use them to produce solely for use, profit no longer stands as a barrier to need and we are no longer defined as workers but as human beings, running our society for ourselves. Only by conscious and democratic action will such a socialist system of society be established

There will be no socialism without socialists and that is why the sole task of the Socialist Party is to convince our fellow workers of the logic and the desirability of establishing socialism. Very often this

means urging workers to want something more than what they once thought was 'enough'. In the case of the miners' strike, it meant telling miners that there is more to aim for than the opportunity to be exploited by the Coal Board and allowed to live in the poverty of a mining community. Those workers who listen to us might tell us that what we say sounds good and appealing, but we'll never get it in their lifetimes; how strange a response that is when it is considered that workers have spent lifetimes trying to win a fair deal out of capitalism and *that* is certainly unachievable! Other workers tell us that socialists want too much. But is it too much to want the fruits of our collective labour to belong to everyone rather than to the small class of rich parasites who live on our backs today? Why not tell the bosses next time they tell you to pull in your belts for the sake of the nation that they are the ones who want too much? Why not aim for a society in which men and women not only have the freedom to produce coal when it is needed, but also have the right not to have to go down a pit in order to make a living? A society in which the earth is the common property of all must be the real alternative to aim at. The task of the Socialist Party is to show workers that it is a practical proposition which calls for their urgent attention in order to transform a picture of how we *could* live into a movement for how we *shall* live. Clearly, then, socialists are far from telling workers to sit back and do nothing. On the contrary, we call upon our fellow workers to devote ten times more energy working to end the system than we are forced to spend defending ourselves within it. They should take the advice of Marx who stated that

...the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these *everyday* struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerilla fights incessantly springing up from the never-ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market... Instead of the conservative motto 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work' they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wages system!' (*Value, Price and Profit*).

## 4 What is the Alternative?

Beyond the struggle to exist within capitalism there is the greater struggle which is to abolish capitalism. In a socialist society men and women will be able to say that they have won more than the struggle for existence: they will have achieved the right to live fully. How is this to be achieved?

The establishment of socialism requires political action, taken democratically and with the force of class-consciousness. If we are to live in a socialist society, we must first dispossess the minority of the power to exploit us in the workplace and coerce us via the state. It is we, the workers, who vote to give our masters their power and it is we who must take it away from them. It should be obvious to all but those of dogmatic faith that the Labour Party is not an instrument for dispossessing the capitalists of their power. When the miners were out on strike in 1926 the Secretary of their union, A. J. Cook, declared that 'We have been fighting not only against the Government and the owners, but against a number of Labour leaders, especially the political leaders' (*Newcastle Chronicle*, 24 May 1926). Writing in June 1985, Bill Matthews of Hatfield Main NUM commented that 'Victory to the NUM was also hampered by the inactivity of the political forces of the left Kinnoch sat on the fence during the whole of the dispute' (*Rank And File Miner*, June 1985). The most that some Labourites could do was to argue that the pits on the government hit-list could be run profitably. In short, the Labour Left pleaded with the capitalists to see the wisdom of continuing to exploit the miners. Whenever the Labour Party is in power it continues to run the system for the benefit of the rich – in fact, according to official government statistics, the richest one per cent in Britain grew richer during the course of the last Labour government

The failure of electing Labour MPs as a means of changing society in the workers' interest has led some people to advocate non-political ways of achieving what they call socialism. For example, since the beginning of the century some workers have placed their faith in the tactic of a general strike. J. T. Murphy, an early member of the Communist Party, argued that 'The general strike demonstrated before our eyes how the working class comes to power' (*The Revolutionary Workers' Government*). The main lesson of the 1926 General Strike in Britain, and of other attempts at using the same tactic in other countries, is that striking does not succeed if state power is left with the minority. Indeed, Murphy was later to understand this and wrote a pamphlet in which he said of the general strike that 'If it is an action to impose terms, whether economic or political, upon the powers-that-be, then it means an unarmed proletariat faces an armed State, which must either capitulate or defeat the strike' (*Preparing For Power*).

Another tactic which is advocated by those who have an outdated conception of revolution is that of the insurrection. Such methods of revolution were normal in the past when minority classes were fighting other minorities for power. But why should a majority class engage in a civil war against the capitalists when we can beat them quite easily by force of numbers. Tony Cliff, one of the leaders of the Socialist Workers' Party, which spends its time dreaming of a revolutionary civil war in which it will lead the workers, writes, in his book on Lenin, that 'In our times there is not a single issue which can be decided by ballots. In the decisive class battles bullets will prevail'. Cliff and his followers seem to believe that workers will never be persuaded in a majority to vote for socialism through the ballot box but will be prepared to arm themselves and fight for socialism using guns and bullets which are going to mysteriously appear when they are needed. Such nonsense is a diversion from the real task of organising for socialism.

To establish socialism, workers must gain control of the powers of government and use these for the single purpose of dispossessing the capitalists and ushering in common ownership and democratic control of means of production and distribution. In most advanced capitalist countries the workers are the overwhelming majority of the voters. There is nothing to stop us from making revolutionary use of the ballot box in order to show that conscious socialists are in the majority. Having been stripped of their property titles, what could the capitalist minority do to stop socialism from functioning? They could try a spot of violence here and there, demonstrating their contempt for the majority decision, but it does not take much imagination to foresee that any such attempts to enforce a return to minority rule would be very short-lived indeed.

Once socialism has been brought about we can set about the exciting and practical work of running society for the benefit of all. In fact, as the movement for socialism grows there will no doubt be plans made by workers as to how a society based upon production for use will be able to solve social problems efficiently and quickly. Democratic decisions will need to be made, not by leaders or by governments, but by all interested people. That people are capable of organising their own affairs in common is one of the things that was clearly demonstrated by the mining communities in the 1984-85

strike. The way in which, within communities, people cooperated to pool their energies and resources and take what they needed from a common store is only part of a mass of existing evidence supporting the view that human beings, if the circumstances dictate it, are willing and able to cooperate in their common interest. The present circumstances of minority ownership and control mean that the producers and consumers of goods and services are far less important than the demands of profit. The circumstances of a world which is owned and controlled by all its inhabitants will mean that human needs will be the sole criterion of social decision-making. Nor will 'human nature' be a barrier to this. On the contrary it is only because man does *not* have a fixed nature but is a highly adaptable animal that such a change in society is possible.

In a socialist society there will be no market, no buying and selling, and no money. Exchange can have no function where everything belongs to everyone. All people will have free access to the goods and services available. No human being need ever starve in a world of potential food for all; never again need anyone die of the cold because they cannot afford coal or other energy sources. Production will carry on with all people contributing according to their abilities and taking according to their needs. Wage labour will not exist, as nobody will be selling their mental and physical energies to anyone else, and enforced idleness (unemployment) will be a thing of the past. The sole concern in producing and distributing wealth will be, do people require it? Never again will human needs and communal interests be ignored for the sake of profit. Production for use will mean the liberation of humanity from the social problems which dominate the news every day, but which can never be solved within capitalism.

Socialists urge our fellow workers to consider the alternative to the struggle to keep their heads above the muddy waters of capitalism. At best workers might strain to keep going, at worst they go under. The alternative is to bring about a new way of organising society – a new way of living – based on common ownership, democratic control, and production for use, not profit. Only this will be victory for the working class.