POLMAISE

THE FIGHT FOR A PIT

By JOHN McCORMACK (former Polmaise NUM delegate)

with Simon Pirani

Preface

to the 2015 edition

This book by John McCormack was first published in 1989 by Index Books. This new edition is published on line with John's permission. It is free for anyone and everyone to download, copy, print and distribute. The text is unchanged. I have added a few explanatory notes. The cover photo, and the one of the Polmaise banner on page 27, are from the *Newsline* archive; all the rest are copied from the original book. My thanks to Clapham Andy, who helped put this edition together. *Simon Pirani*.

■ *Cover photo: Polmaise miners at a demonstration in London, 19 April 1984.*

Preface to the 1989 edition

John McCormack, who comes from a mining family, worked at Polmaise colliery in Fallin, Stirlingshire, from the time he left school in 1947 until October 1985. His working life thus began when the coal industry was nationalised and ended during the Tory government's onslaught on the pits following the 1984-1985 national strike.

Having served on the Polmaise NUM committee and as NUM pit delegate from 1979, John McCormack was among the militant miners' leaders who found themselves in the front line against Thatcher. In 1983 Polmaise was subjected to the first lock-out in the Scottish coalfield since the war; it was one of the five pits whose threatened closure sparked the 1984-1985 national strike. Its miners were out three weeks before, and back to work a week after, the majority of strikers, thus breaking Polmaise's own record, established in 1938, for the longest strike in the Scottish coalfield.

Hounded out of the pit after the strike, John McCormack continued to work on behalf of the Polmaise sacked miners. He is married with a daughter and a granddaughter, and lives in Fallin.

The facts in this book speak for themselves: where views are expressed they are John McCormack's. The text is based on tape-recordings he made; I transcribed these and checked points of fact against files of the *Stirling Observer*, *Scottish Miner*, *Guardian*, *Glasgow Herald*, *News Line*, minutes of the National Union of Mineworkers' Scottish area and national conferences, the Polmaise NUM minutes and other written material. Rowland Sheret, Alex McCallum, Johnny Higgins and other members and former members of the NUM helped fill in some details. John McCormack checked and amended the final text. *Simon Pirani*.

A guide for non-miners

You descend a pit by the SHAFT. All workmen going down are given two TOKENS: a brass one which they take down the pit, and a zinc one which is handed to the checker. This is a safety measure: in the event of an accident the tokens can be checked. The BANKSMEN are responsible for the CAGE (a lift) which descends the shaft; they "bell you down the pit", ringing a bell to indicate at which level the cage should stop.

MINES are underground tunnels; they are driven (non-miners might say "tunnelled") through stone into the coal seams. This DEVELOPMENT work prepares the way for PRODUCTION, i.e. the actual extraction of coal, which is mined from SECTIONS (in English pits they are called districts). Tunnelling through the geological FAULTS is a problem, certainly one used as an excuse for declaring Polmaise pit "unviable". Mining always involves waste material being brought to the surface; at each pit-head a slag heap, or PIT BING as they say in Scotland, accumulates.

COLLIERS, or FACE-WORKERS as they are generally called nowadays, work at the coal-face and are the most highly-paid miners. Then come the ON-COST MEN (they are called Datal men in English pits), who work on transport and other underground jobs, and finally SURFACE WORKERS. There are also skilled CRAFTSMEN, fitters and electricians.

The Scottish pits generally worked a three-shift system – at Polmaise the DAY SHIFT started at 7 a.m., the BACK or afternoon

SHIFT at 2 p.m. and the NIGHT SHIFT at 10 p.m.

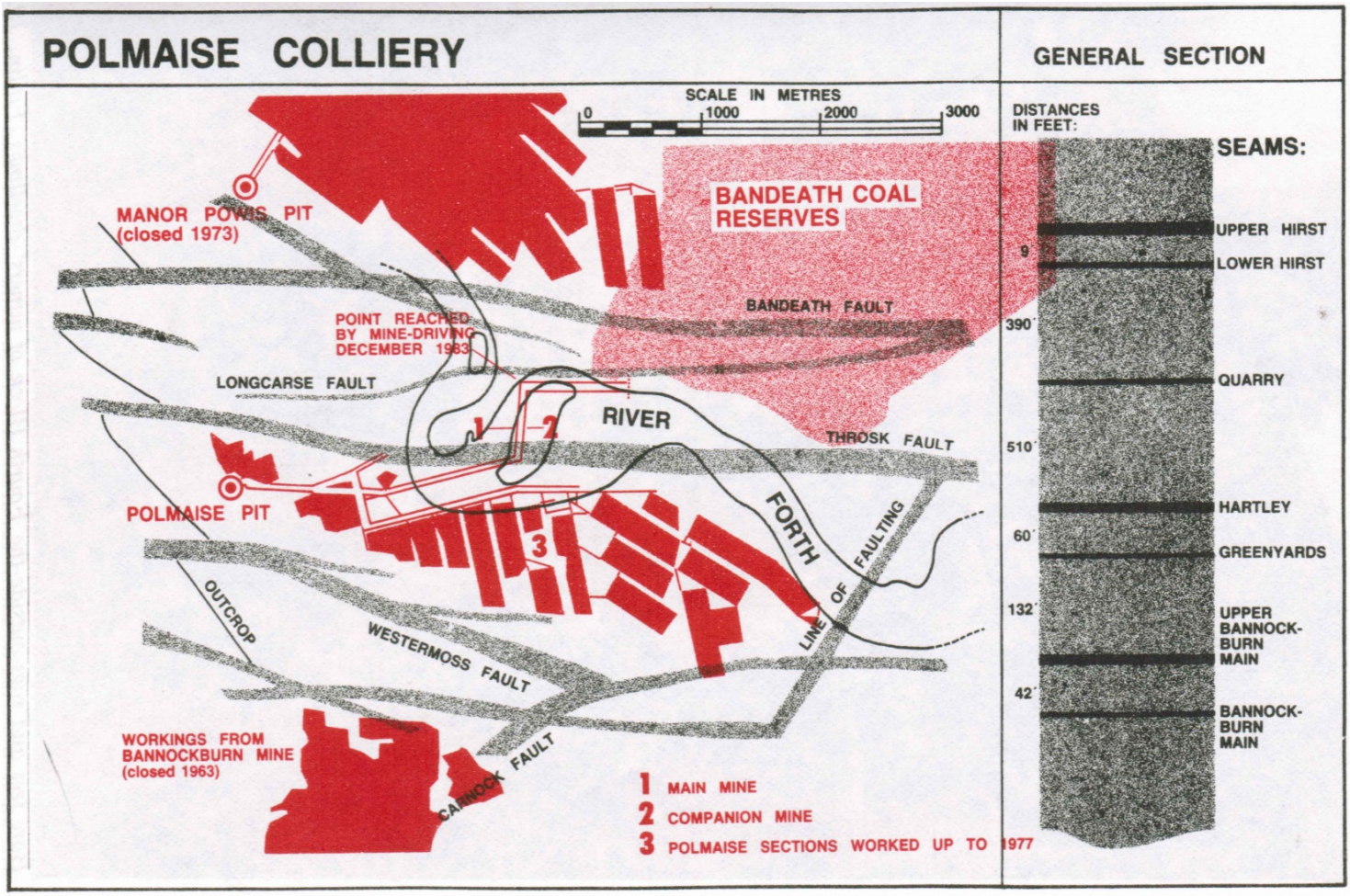
Among the improvements fought for over the years are a number of REST DAYS per year, and extra payments for bad conditions, particularly WATER MONEY for working in wet conditions.

All miners are members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM); the craftsmen are organised separately, in Scotland by the Scottish Colliery Engineers, Boilermens' and Tradesmens' Association (SCEBTA).

There are various safety officers and foremen down a pit: DEPUTIES, or FIREMEN, whose statutory function is primarily to implement safety rules, although improving production tends to dominate their work; the OVERSMEN who are responsible for production; and SHOTFIRERS who are specifically responsible for dynamiting stone. All these grades are organised by the National Association of Colliery Oversmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS). Management grades are members of the British Association of Colliery Managers (BACM).

CONTRACTORS, who were used by the private mine-owners to work sections of the pit, were driven out of coal production work with nationalisation, although they continued to be used for mine-driving and other work. Now they are returning on a larger scale.

Scottish miners call their workplace NUM branches "branches", but in England and Wales they are "lodges". The NUM branch secretary used to be the spokesman and chief negotiator in a Scottish pit, but after the war a separate job of DELEGATE was created. The union also has full-time AGENTS, responsible for working with lay officials.



1. Polmaise, a village pit

Mine shafts Nos. 1 and 2 were sunk at Polmaise in January 1904, and Nos. 3 and 4 shafts in October that year. Coal production started in 1905. The pit owners were Archibald Russell and Sons, a company that owned pits through in Lanarkshire.

The pit grew and there were 1,000 men working there by the early 1930s; Fallin village grew along with it. Cottages were built right in front of the pit, for tradesmen and colliery officials. The first houses built for the miners were the blocks: rows of houses, one upstairs and another downstairs, with big iron stairs outside.

When I was a small child, in the 1930s, our family stayed in the blocks. My address was "No. 79, Fourth Block, Fallin." The houses were just a single room and kitchen. All the houses were that size, however many were in the family. The kitchen had a sink and a big fireplace which burned coal: I didn't know there was such a thing as an electric cooker at that time. There was no warm tap water: it had to be boiled on the fire.

There were two recesses in the kitchen, each with a double bed, and apart from the kitchen there was just one other room. In many miners' families, the parents stayed in the kitchen with the younger children, and a couple who were just married would get the room. To get to the room, the couple had to walk through the kitchen where the rest of the family were staying.

The roads outside the blocks were just muck. When it was raining it turned into a quagmire.

In 1926, of course, the Polmaise miners were involved in the General Strike. Then in 1938, they were on strike themselves for ten months, the longest-running miners' strike in Scotland up until 1984-1985. Conditions in the pits had deteriorated after the General Strike. Conveyor belts had been introduced at the coal-face, and the sections were operated by contractors, who paid men nine shillings a shift, with a possible extra shilling a shift water money (if you were lucky). The contractors claimed they were paid by the ton, but in fact they were paid "per lamp" (i.e. according to the number of men employed) and were taking advantage of the men.

The 1938 strike was a battle between the colliers, who wanted to work directly for the company on a pooling system, and the contractors.

For the first five months of the 1938 strike, miners were also on strike at Millhall colliery nearby. The men working the new machinery there started a work-to-rule, demanding better payments for dealing with machine breakdowns. On the first day of the work-to-rule one of the machinemen was sacked for refusing to do overtime. This issue was settled in June, but the Polmaise men stayed out until November.

I was seven years old at the time, and my father was on strike. I can remember going to the soup kitchens at the miners' welfare. The miners' homes were owned by the coal company, so when some of the strikers were sacked from the pit, they were also put out of their houses. In the main hall of the miners' welfare, there were six or seven miners and their families staying, who had been evicted.

The Macgregors were one of these families. The father had been sacked, and they had been flung out of their house. To show support for that family, nobody would take that house, and it lay empty for a time. The Macgregors never got back to the miners' rows, and ended up getting a council house in Fallin village. The Polmaise miners won out against the contractors. The pooling system was introduced on the coal face. There was an immediate increase of two or sometimes three shillings a shift and the miners had the satisfaction of knowing that increased production would mean a bonus in that week. Although the contractors continued to do drivage and other work after 1938, they were eradicated entirely from coal production in 1938, which was a big step forward.

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I first came to work in the pit in December 1947. The coal industry had been nationalised in January of the same year – but that didn't mean that things changed overnight. I remember it being very hard at first, and things becoming easier as the years went on. Perhaps this was partly just me getting accustomed to it – but when I say easier, I also mean that we began to get better organised. The union grew stronger, and the

Bare feet and rags outside the Fourth Block of miners' dwellings, Fallin, 1911

conditions underground got a lot better. Since the 1984-1985 miners' strike, the situation regarding trade unions in the pits has gone back the way. At one time the miners wouldn't have worked with the type of management and the lack of negotiation with unions that prevails now. Today they have to, or get sacked. I used to say to miners, during the strike, that once the Coal Board got manpower levels down to what suited them, then you would feel the boot going in. It's happening now.

The Tories are trying to go back to the pre-1947 days, to undo what was done by the working class after the war. Along with the threat of privatisation, we are seeing the return of the sort of contractor who was in the pit in the 1930s: he paid you what he wanted, and if you looked at him the wrong way you didn't know if you would be working next day. Some of the lads who worked at Polmaise now work at Castlebridge with private contractors: they start on a day shift on a Monday morning, and then find that they have been changed to the back shift for Tuesday, back to the day shift on Wednesday, night shift on Thursday, and back shift on Friday.

From the time that I started working at Polmaise, it was always 100 per cent union. Before they started deducting union dues from your wages, you paid them yourself at a little office in the pit yard.

Being a village pit, Polmaise was in a way a law unto itself. We were often out on strike on our own, without even getting in contact with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) office in Edinburgh to tell them. For example, there would be strikes because men working at the coal face would decide they were not getting enough water money; we would come out for an extra six old pence, or a shilling. There were times when men went on strike, but were then held at the pit bottom for a full shift, on instructions by phone from the manager – and never got paid for it.

For a long time, we had a situation where

some people would go on strike while others were working. You might have Polmaise No. 3 pit on strike while No. 4 pit was working. Sometimes the East Level section was on strike, while the Hartley, which was a section of the same pit, would be working. Then there were always arguments over the face-workers' wages; they would stay off on strike on Monday and Tuesday, and come in on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday to make their wages up; then the on-cost men would go on strike at the back end of the week – not against the management, but against the colliers, who by not coming in at the start of the week were keeping the on-cost men's wage levels down.

But as time went by and the unions got stronger, all that stopped. If someone had a grievance and went on strike, the whole pit stopped together. That's how battles were won. The fortunes of the village were always tied up with the fortunes of the pit. As conditions and wages improved at the pit, life in the village improved too.

The miners' welfare, which really took off as a club in the 1950s and 1960s, is the pulse of Fallin village as far as entertainment goes. The welfare is a fine place, with billiard tables, snooker tables, a squash court, and a sauna. In the main hail there are dances, concerts and other entertainment at the weekends.

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In 1954 a major reconstruction programme for Polmaise was authorised by the Coal Board, to produce 1,500 tons per day from the deep seams of Hartley, Upper Main, Knott and Lower Knott, and 1,000 tons per day from the Upper Hirst seam. Later, this plan was revised due to the falling demand for coal, and it was decided to concentrate on getting coal from the Upper Hirst seam, for the Kincardine power station. For years the pit was in full production and everything was going well.

From the end of the national overtime ban in 1974, until the fight over pit closures began in 1981, there wasn't a single day's strike at Polmaise. Not a single dispute even went as far as the agents: all disputes were dealt with between ourselves and the pit management. We were taking coal from the Hirst seam, and by the summer of 1976 we had gone to the top of the productivity ratings, producing 1,400 tons of coal a day. We once produced 20,000 tons of coal in a week.

But then the Hirst seam began to run out, and development work on new faces was not sufficiently advanced, due to serious geological problems and bad planning by the Coal Board. Production went down to 400 tons a day.

On January 31st 1977, a special consultative meeting of all the unions at Polmaise was convened by management to discuss the "lack of productivity". Jimmy Cowane who was then Scottish area director of the National Coal Board, and George Gillespie, then the Scottish area NCB chief engineer, were there.

They opened up by saying that if Polmaise didn't "pull its socks up", it would be shut forthwith.

Terry McMeel was the NUM delegate at that time; I was a member of the pit committee. An action committee was formed to fight the closure, and we held a number of meetings with management. The local branch of the NUM came up with all the propositions.

We drew up a report, which included a 16-point plan on how we could improve the pit. It stated: "By driving two rising mines from the Main Mine and Staple Shaft area to contact the Upper Hirst seam, reserves could be tapped of the order of 2.5 million tons which lie between the Throsk fault and the Bandeath fault. Further reserves lie between the Bandeath fault and the Shaeffer fault of the order of 1.7 million tons, the Shaeffer fault being an 80-foot fault."

The report estimated that there were 7 million tons there: at least 20 years' work if it was taken out at 300,000 tons per annum. It was agreed that if we could up the output, then Jimmy Cowane would go down to NCB headquarters at Hobart House in London, and put forward the case for further development at Polmaise. The closure threat was withdrawn – for the time being. We had to agree to between 200 and 300 men being transferred or taking voluntary redundancy. But the pit stayed open – and we spent the next three years showing that we could increase the output, and awaiting a final decision about going for the Bandeath coal.

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Coal wagons on the Polmaise-Stirling railway line, 1942

During the 1960s, I was a pool leader at the pit, which meant I was in charge of a team of 36 men. This was something the Coal Board introduced: they took an ordinary miner and gave him four shillings a shift extra to be the pool leader. They knew they could get better results from the men that way; it was better to have one of their own mates acting as foreman than to have a foreman of the normal kind.

I dealt directly with management over disputes and grievances, and where there was a pool leader capable of doing that, the union at that time was quite happy to let him get on with it.

But there were things in the pit I didn't agree with: for example, men getting preferential treatment because the manager liked their faces. This was part of the reason I got involved in the union.

We managed to change certain things – for example we started rotas for weekend work. That caused a rumpus, because we put an end to the situation where weekend work was given to the management's favourite men. We found that there were some individuals who didn't like the new rota system – but they just had to accept it.

When I got involved in the union, there were older men round about who could advise you on how to work, how to organise, and how to approach management. You had Alex McCallum's father, "Big Eck", who was secretary of the union for years; Johnny Higgins and "Gum" Stevenson; Terry McMeel and Alex Wilson, who both served as delegates; Alex Laird senior, who was the chairman of the Polmaise NUM for many years; Peter Bolton, who is dead now, but whose son was involved in the miners' strike; John Watson, who together with Bill Craig of the Fire Brigades Union worked to get Stirling trades council going again, after years of inactivity, in 1969. With men like these in charge, the union was respected in the pit.

Having started on the pit committee, and going on to the vice-president's job, I took the delegate's job in 1979, and as delegate I always tried to work in the interests of the miners. (There was only one part of the delegate's job I refused to do: I wouldn't take part in the various foreign visits arranged by the NUM Scottish area. I had my name removed from the rota for these delegations, and only put it back on when the branch insisted, during the, 1984-1985 miners' strike.)

In the years that I was delegate, I worked with management but I also grabbed every bit

of authority I could lay my hands on. The union came to run the pit: we actually did the management's job. We gave the men the shifts, we gave the men the rest days. If a man slept in and wanted a rest day, normally the under-manager would say "no", and that would be another day that man would have to lose – whereas we would say, "OK, give him the rest day".

I could be sitting in the club on a Sunday night, and a miner who was on the day shift on the Monday morning might come up and say: "John, could I get a change on to the back shift tomorrow?" and I would say yes, and I would fix that when I went to the pit on the Monday morning. If men wanted to go home early because of a family occasion or a problem of some kind, this was organised through the union. So it meant better conditions for the men, and also stopped rest days being lost at the pit. Most pits would have worked as well as we did if the delegates had had as much scope and as much say in the running of things as I had at that time.

Of course there were people who wanted to abuse the situation we had created, but the union made it clear that they were not going to get away with this and they had to come into line. Otherwise it would all have fallen apart.

There were very few problems. Everyone enjoyed their work more because the union was running the pit instead of management. The manager was happy too, because the pit was working normally. He sat in the background, and got all the praise for it when he went to management meetings in Edinburgh.

Under Thatcher, all that was blown to smithereens.

2. The Scottish coalfield threatened

We could feel the thin end of the wedge going in against the unions a long way before the miners' strike.

Say for example there was work on at the weekend, a job taking two days. Normally, I would say to the under-manager, "The men on that job will work right through and finish it, going down the pit at 9 a.m. on Saturday morning, coming back up at 7 p.m. the same night, and doing two shifts in one go; you pay them a double shift for the Sunday and a shift-and-a-half for the Saturday." He would say yes. But all that was stopped.

Another example was that we used to decide, ourselves, which men would go to a consultative meeting. But then the manager started cutting them all down, telling us who could and who couldn't go to these meetings.

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At Polmaise, the re-development plan that we had fought for in 1977 was finally agreed to in February 1980. Existing production in the area between the Westermoss fault and the Throsk fault was to be run down and stopped. We were to go for coal on the other side of the Forth river, left behind from Manor Powis colliery which had closed down, and also coal left from when Cowie pit shut down. This meant driving a new mine.

As part of the deal, we had to agree to between 200 and 300 men being transferred while redevelopment took place. As the work in the Westermoss sections came to an end, these men were transferred across to the Longannet complex in Fife and to Kinneil colliery at Bo'ness.

The Coal Board agreed, and it was minuted, that, when the development was complete and we were ready to go back into production, the men transferred out would be the first back to Polmaise.

The redevelopment started and £15.8 million was spent on Polmaise between 1980 and 1983. New buildings were installed on the surface. Two Dosco cutting machines were brought in. The railway line from Polmaise to Stirling was refurbished.

"The work went according to plan and within the allocated budget," said an economic report on the Scottish coalfield, drawn up during the 1984-1985 strike by two academics, George Kerevan and Richard Savile. "Down to 1983 a total of 16,800 feet of parallel roadways was completed, including drivage work through the Throsk fault. *The absenteeism rate was one of the lowest in the UK, there were no industrial stoppages and industrial relations at the pit were described as good."*

But there was a fight in front – about other things, over which we had no control.

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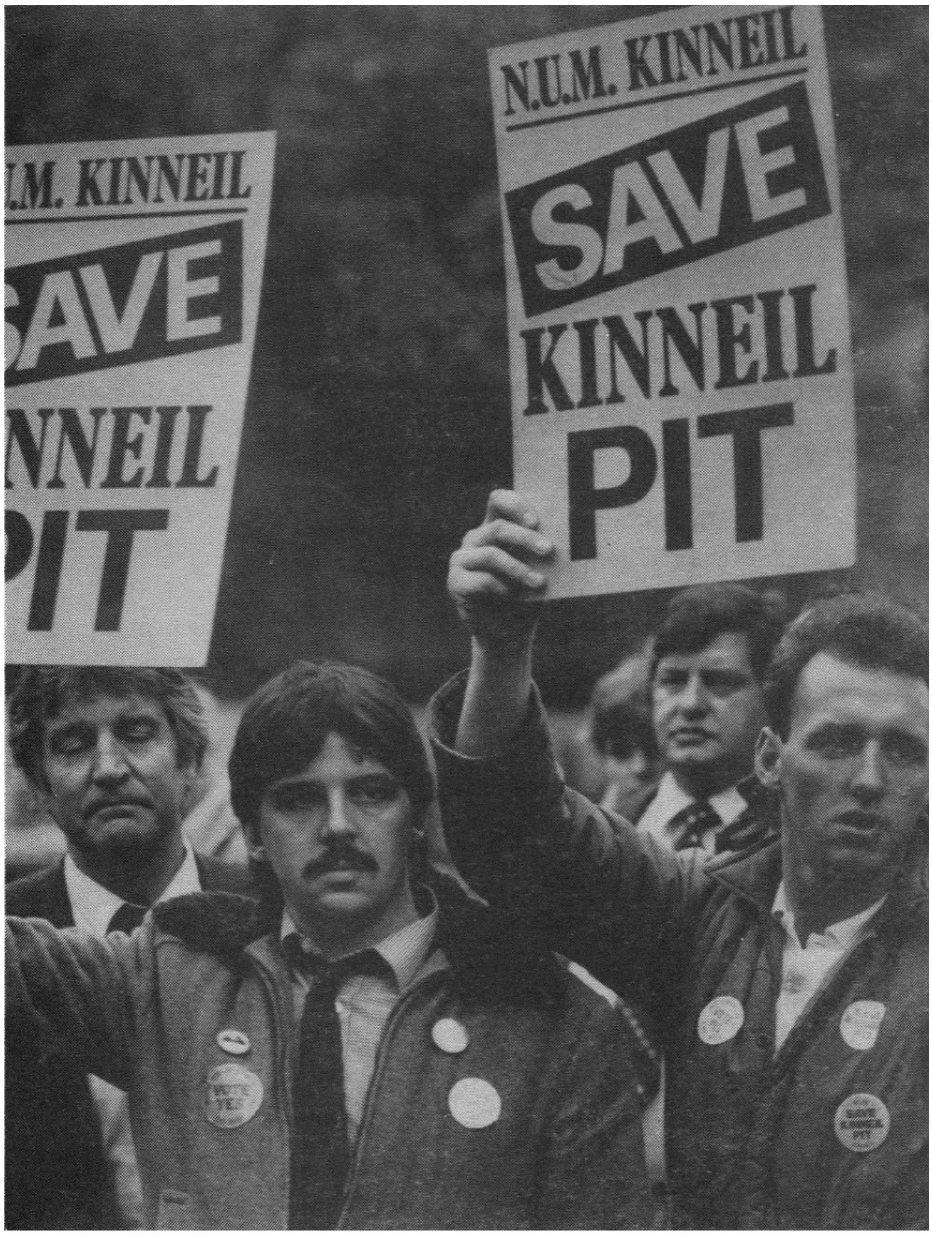
The Thatcher government came to power in May 1979, and in less than two years the miners came face-to-face with them – in February 1981, when the Coal Board announced a plan to close 23 pits. A strike began on February 16th at one of the Welsh pits which was on the closure list. It spread rapidly and Polmaise was one of the first Scottish pits out.

The NUM Scottish area vice-president, George Bolton, had phoned me and told me the executive wanted Polmaise to be idle. But we already knew ourselves that we would be idle. We didn't need to be told.

The press came to the pit, wanting to know why we were out on strike. We kidded them on and told them a bus-load of Welshmen had come up and knocked us idle during the night shift. This rumour spread so far that we even had a call from BBC Radio Wales. But in fact there were no Welsh miners in sight!



Kinneil miners fighting for their pit, December 1982. Bill Sneddon, SCEBTA dlegate, on the left; Jackie Wright from Fallin with the tie.

This all happened on a Tuesday. Some pits didn't go out on strike; they were waiting until the Saturday, when they held their branch meetings. But by that time Thatcher had drawn her wings in, the proposed closure plan had been withdrawn, and the pits were all back at work.

It was no coincidence that Polmaise was one of the first pits out. We had a reputation for militancy which went back to before the war. We didn't need anyone to come to convince us it was right to go on strike. We could discuss it at local level, in the miners' welfare, in the pit yard, or in the union office (or union box, as we called it). In fact I cannot remember an executive Committee member ever coming to Polmaise to talk about strike action: it was always left to the local delegate, branch committee, and membership.

The union box at Polmaise was open to any member. At times you couldn't get in, because it was full of men sitting, getting themselves involved – whether they were on the committee or not. There are some pits where miners only go in the union box if they have a case to be dealt with, but Polmaise was not one of those. The miners used to come in, listen to different arguments about problems at the pit, and have a blether and a cup of tea. We always had a big teapot full of strong tea.

When I took over as delegate, there were 600 men in the pit – and in a certain sense you could say, there were 600 delegates. Everybody knew what was going on, they could relay the message. It all made the job very easy. Plus I had a good committee to work with. If I was away at a meeting, there

were those like Jock Perrie (our former minutes secretary, who died after the strike), James Armitage the branch secretary, or George Goodwillie the branch chairman, who could keep an eye on things. This was why it was so sad when Polmaise closed: it was a village pit, one that you actually looked forward to going to. The involvement was great, it was a viable unit and everything was working smooth.

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In June 1982, Arthur Scargill was elected national president of the NUM with 70.4 per cent of the votes. In September that year, the NUM national conference at Inverness decided a policy of all-out opposition to pit closures, together with demands for a four-day week, retirement at 55, and wage increases for all grades with a £115-a-week minimum.

In October, there was a national NUM ballot for strike action, against pit closures and for a 31-per-cent wage increase. The theme of the papers at that time was that in some of the English pits large amounts of bonus would be lost if there was a strike. I think this sort of propaganda swung things against the proposal for strike action – and while the majority of Scottish miners (69 per cent) voted for strike action, on a national scale the ballot was lost.

Polmaise often had a 98-per-cent vote in favour of strike action not just in one ballot, but in practically every ballot we took. Some of our senior NUM officials in the Scottish area didn't think results of this kind were feasible! But the reason for them was that we were a village pit and the solidarity was there.

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Having decided to fight all closures (except on grounds of exhaustion) the NUM didn't have to wait very long for one. In October 1982 the Coal Board announced that Kinneil pit at Bo'ness, west Lothian, was to close. The Kinneil men were promised full backing from the NUM and from the Labour Party national conference.

On Monday December 21st 1982, twelve Kinneil men, who became known as the "Dirty Dozen", began a five-day underground sit-in. They came to the surface on Christmas Day. Then a branch meeting was held and it was decided to picket all the Scottish pits, asking them to strike in support of Kinneil.

The picketing began on December 27th. Cardowan, Polmaise, Bogside, Sorn, Killoch and Comrie pits walked out straight away. Castlehill followed on the back shift. Highouse said they would strike at the end of the holidays. The Kinneil pickets got only a partial response at Solsgirth, Monktonhall and Bilston Glen. There were no pickets at Seafield or Frances, but one-third of the Frances day shift went home anyway.

On the Tuesday morning, December 28th, a conference of NUM secretaries and delegates from all the Scottish pits was held. Present were five representatives from the Lewis Merthyr pit in Wales, who also faced the threat of closure and who were up in Scotland looking for support. The Scottish area NUM also allowed some of the Kinneil miners to come into the meeting, without taking any part.

Mick McGahey [the Scottish NUM president] started off, with a report from a special [Scottish NUM] executive committee meeting held the previous day. At the executive meeting, he explained, "every member had reported on the position in their own and adjacent collieries, when it had been clearly demonstrated that the hearts and minds of the Scottish miners had not been won for action on Kinneil" (quoted from the official NUM minutes). McGahey continued: "Reluctantly, therefore, the executive Committee had decided unanimously to call off action in support of Kinneil, where limited action had taken place, and to call for the resumption of normal working, which in effect meant the loss of Kinneil colliery." He opposed further strike action on the basis that "fragmentation throughout the coalfield could result in battles being lost in future".

It was not true that the hearts and minds of the miners had not been won for Kinneil. I know for example that there was never an EC member at Polmaise to discuss the Kinneil situation. The only person who came and spoke to us was Jimmy McCallum, the Kinneil NUM delegate. We told him that the Polmaise men were backing him to a man, 100 per cent, and we came out on strike.

On the morning of this meeting, myself and Jim Armitage, the Polmaise branch secretary, had gone up to Edinburgh in the car with the Castlehill delegate. We had been talking in the car about the need to do something to back Kinneil colliery, and the

Castlehill delegate agreed. The miners were stopping work for Hogmanay [traditional Scottish word for New Year's Eve] the next day. And his version of it was that, once the holidays were by, we would all be on strike for Kinneil. And yet when McGahey got up and made his statement that Kinneil was effectively lost, the Castlehill delegate jumped up and agreed with him straight away.

"Fragmentation in the coalfield now could affect the struggles in future," said the Castlehill delegate, and while he and other branch officials at Castlehill had fully supported the Kinneil miners in their stand, there was, in view of the situation which had now developed, no alternative but to support the executive committee recommendation. The reason they constantly gave for not supporting Kinneil was "fragmentation" in the branches or "fragmentation" in the coalfield. The delegate from Bilston Glen said: "Unfortunately, there has not been a response and to do other than accept the executive committee's recommendation would cause fragmentation, leading to a lengthy battle which would involve miner fighting miner and which must be avoided."

There were other similar statements. One executive committee member said that while his own colliery, Bogside, had been idle, he had not been able to come forward with an alternative at the special meeting of the executive committee, hence the reason why he had voted along with the executive committee in favour of the recommendation proposed by the Scottish area officials. His own pit was idle – and yet he voted to shut Kinneil! Another executive member said that to have rejected the Scottish area officials' recommendation would have led to further chaos through the coalfield, and there had been no alternative but to accept this recommendation.

These people have a lot to answer for.

The minutes quote Bill Sneddon, the Kinneil SCEBTA delegate who led the underground sit-in: "He had witnessed events in the Scottish coalfield, events which he had never dreamed would occur, where men were running over the top of each other, where certain delegates had pulled pickets off buses and had not allowed [them] to address the men."

Jim McCallum, with Sneddon and others at the back of him urging him on, moved rejection of the executive committee recommendation to let Kinneil go. This is what the minutes say about my own statement: "Mr McCormack (Fallin) stated that in his opinion the executive committee had dragged their feet. They should be prepared to explain the reasons why they could not win support for Kinneil Colliery, the recommendation now before conference being a complete reversal of previous decisions taken by the Union. His colliery was totally idle and he had hoped that similar support would be forthcoming for the men at Kinneil at today's conference."

At the end of the conference, the NUM delegates voted 12-7 to support the executive, that is, to refuse support to Kinneil. The Scottish Colliery Engineers, Boilermakers and Tradesmen's Association (SCEBTA) delegates also refused support for Kinneil by 8 votes to 6. Some delegates left the hall to shouts of "traitor" and "scab" from Kinneil pickets outside.

This was the first time we began to realise there was something wrong with the Scottish NUM's policy. At that time, we didn't know what was going on between them and the Coal Board – but now, any of the men who worked at Kinneil would tell you that there were dirty tricks. They came to believe that the NUM area leadership was working hand-in-hand with the Coal Board regarding the closure.

If we knew then what we know now, we would have taken a much harder line against these sort of leaders. When I first worked at the pit, before I was involved in the union, I thought the people in the leadership of the union were genuine guys – but once you saw what happened at Kinneil, Sorn, and these other pits, you began to think otherwise.

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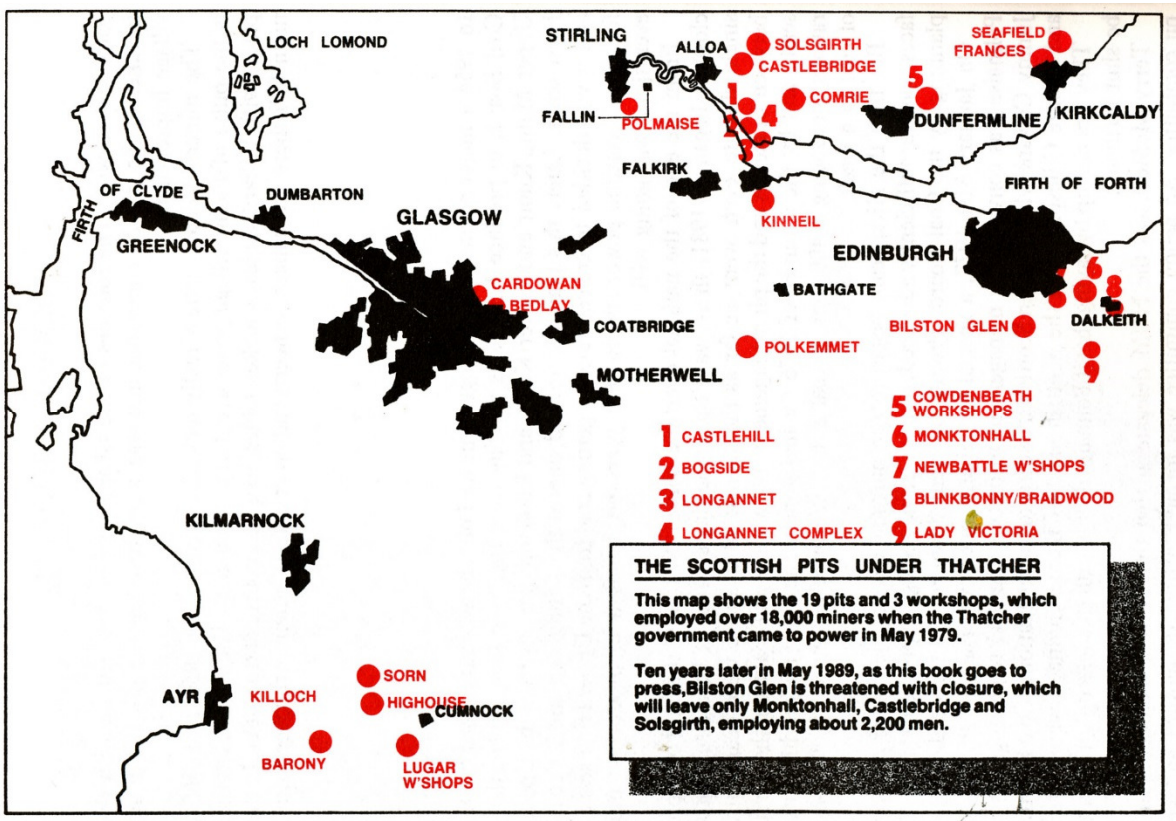
Kinneil turned out to be the first of a series of closures. On April 14th 1983 the Coal Board announced that they intended to close Sorn, a small colliery in Ayrshire. The membership voted by 35 to 7 to fight for their jobs. Alex Mills, the delegate there, was a good man, and a continuous thorn in the side of the Coal Board and union leadership alike.

But Sorn – and Highouse colliery nearby, which was closed shortly afterwards – did not get any support. It was as if they were not there. No recommendation came from the Scottish executive to fight for either pit.



The Scottish pits under Thatcher: 1979-1989

Name	No. employed 1979	No. employed 1989	
Mid- and East Lothian			
Bilston Glen	1800	800	Closure announced April 1989
Monktonhall	1800	200	Production stopped 1988; now a development pit
Lady Victoria	700	0	Most men left 1979-1980; closed 1981
Newbattle workshops	400	0	Closed April 1985
Roslin depot	60	0	Closed 1987
Blinkbonny-Braidwood (private mine)	100	0	Closed 1988
West Lothian			
Polkemmet	800	0	Flooded during strike (November 1984); closed just after strike
Kinneil	300	0	Closure proposed October 1982; closed 1983
Fife			
Seafield	1600	0	Closed January 1988 when there were 650 men there
Frances	700	54	Coal-faces lost due to fire during strike; 600 redundancies in 1985; now on a 'care and maintenance' basis, commonly believed to be preparation for privatisation
Cowdenbeath workshops	350	0	Closed December 1988
Comrie	700	0	Closure proposed early 1986; accepted by NUM June 1986; closed soon after
Fife (Longannet complex)			
Castlehill	1000	50	Partially flooded during strike; now open as training centre and supply depot
Solsgirth	1500	400	Production ceased December 1988; development work now in progress
Bogside	900	0	Flooded January 1984; closed in weeks
Longannet mine	100	100	
Castlebridge	0	1500	Opened after strike
Stirlingshire			
Polmaise	700	0	Closure announced December 1983; reprieved during strike; closure announced June 1987; closed immediately.
Lanarkshire			
Cardowan	520	0	Closure announced early 1983; vote to accept closure August 1983; closed 1983
Bedlay	500	0	Closed November 1981
Ayrshire			
Killoch	1950	0	Closed September 1986
Barony	1200	0	Closed January 1989
Sorn	260	0	Closure announced April 1983; closed May 1983
Highouse	400	0	Closed late 1983
Lugar workshops	80	0	Closed

3. Transfers, lock-outs … and sabotage

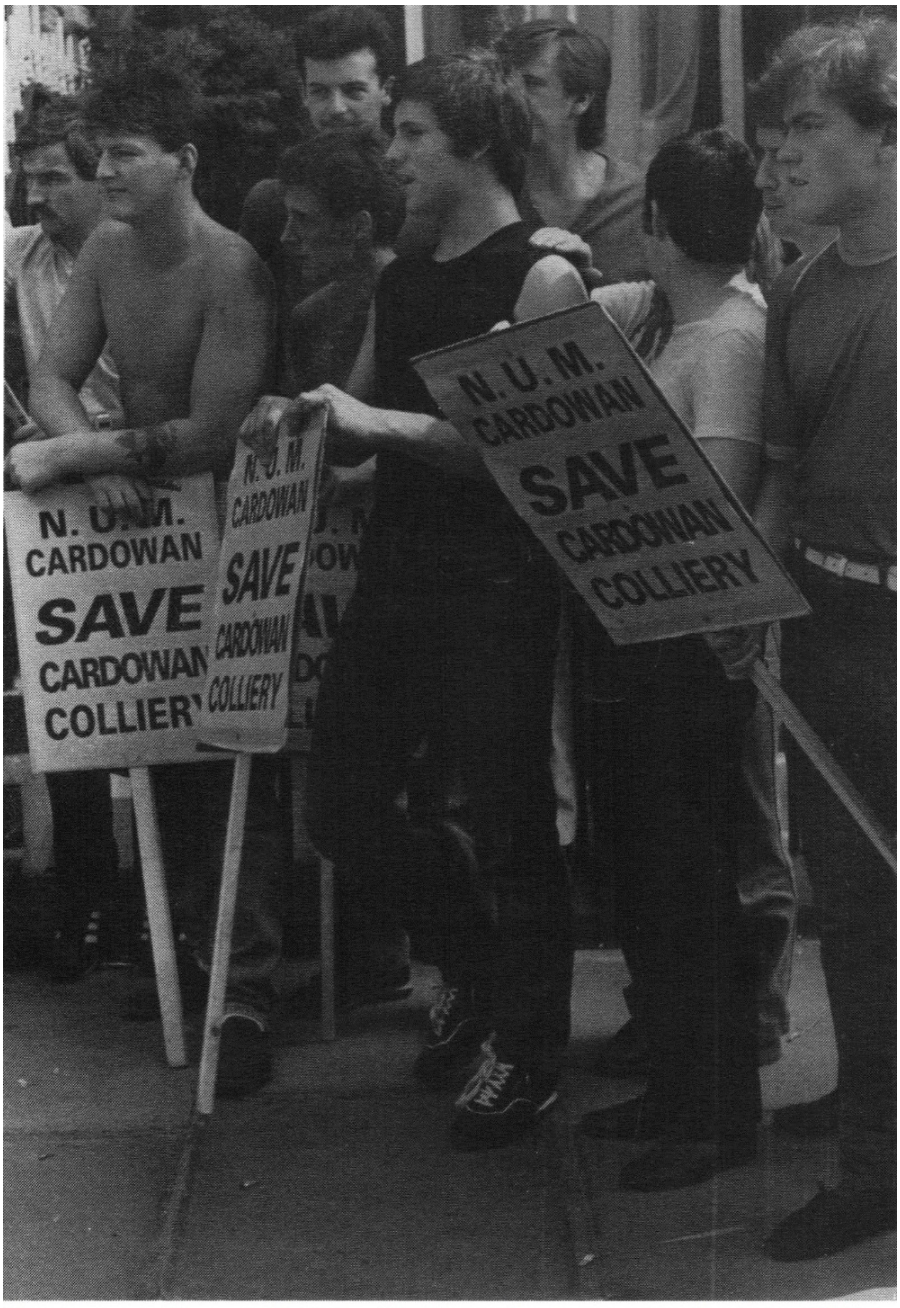
In June 1983 the Tories were re-elected with an increased majority. Scargill publicised their plans to close 70 pits and destroy 70,000 jobs in the mining industry. The next battle in Scotland was at Cardowan, the only remaining pit in the Lanarkshire coalfield, where just after the war there had been 16,000 miners.

The Cardowan miners, like those at Kinneil, voted to fight for their colliery. So the Coal Board changed their tactics. Instead of threatening the Cardowan men with redundancy, they put up a notice on the canteen wall, announcing that miners could apply for transfer to other pits.

They were encouraged to go to pits including Polmaise and Polkemmet, both of which had a life-span, according to the NCB itself, of 30 or 40 years. Considerable "transfer fees" were offered: three lump-sum payments of £250 each, over two years; a re-settlement payment if the miner had to move house; protected earnings whatever job they moved to… and under-the-table payments, the existence of which were officially denied. All this to prevent a show-down over pit closures.

At this time, our pit was still being developed. There were about 300 Polmaise men who had transferred across to the Longannet complex and Kinneil in 1980, until development was completed. Only 20 of them came back to Polmaise, from Kinneil when it closed; they stayed for 13 weeks doing salvage work, and were then re-transferred to Comrie. Then streamlining began there, so ten of them came back to Polmaise again, and the rest went to Castlehill and Bogside. We were working with management to put the pit on a sound basis. We were driving towards the faults, knowing that once we were through them, there was 30 or 40 years' work for Polmaise, mining the Bandeath coal at the other side. We repeatedly asked the Polmaise manager, Donald Cameron, for more men to be brought back to the pit so that we could work faster. For example on July 4th 1983, George Goodwillie (NUM chairman), Jim Armitage (secretary) and myself made this request and as usual, the answer was no.

So you can understand how disturbed we were when, the very next morning, Tuesday July 5th, four men from Cardowan turned up at our pit. They had been offered "transfer fees", to move to Polmaise and stymie Cardowan's fight for jobs. I told these four



Cardowan miners picket the NUM conference at Perth, July 1983

Cardowan NUM chairman Harry Steele (right) and John McNab (second from right) make a point to Scottish NUM vice-president George Bolton (left), July 1983

miners that we had an agreement, that the first men back to Polmaise would be those transferred away in 1980. Besides, the NUM was in the midst of a campaign to save Cardowan pit, and we had no intention of weakening it. We explained that they had better go back to their own pit and get involved in the fight to keep it open. Eventually they agreed and went away.

Our members decided to go on strike that morning because of management's actions. But we agreed on a return to work on the back and night shifts, provided no Cardowan men were transferred to Polmaise.

We only, found out later the extent of the concerted effort made that day to get Cardowan men accepted at other pits. They had been provided with special transport by the NCB. At the Frances pit in Fife the NUM delegate, John Mitchell, had told the Cardowan men just as we had that they were not welcome, that they should go back and fight for their jobs.

But there had been no effort by the NUM Scottish area leadership to prevent the transfers, which weakened the fight at Cardowan. On the contrary, pits like Seafield and Castlehill were told by the Scottish executive to accept the transferred men while NUM policy was, supposedly, to fight the Cardowan closure! The various executive members were sent to meetings to convince the miners to take in the men from Cardowan: Willie Graham to Bogside, Tammy Coulter to Castlehill, etc.

The next day, Wednesday July 6th, the four Cardowan men returned to Polmaise again, along with three others. We told them they weren't wanted. Again they agreed, and went away. The day shift worked normally.

At 10 a.m. the Polmaise union officials got a message from the colliery manager: stand by, Albert Wheeler (the Scottish area National Coal Board director) is coming to the colliery. We waited in the union office but no-one called us.

At 12 midday, as the back shift men were arriving, the Cardowan men turned up again. We spoke to them at the pit gate. They began to realise they were being used as pawns by the NCB. They apologised for the trouble they had caused, and said they weren't coming back.

Enter Wheeler, with the pit manager and area manager. He brushed by everyone, went to the Cardowan men, and told them to come in and start work. They refused. I introduced myself to Wheeler and asked if I could help. "I don't know you mister," he said, "but if you're the colliery delegate, tell those men to come in to their work". As delegate, I invited the Cardowan men in. They refused again.

Wheeler saw he wasn't getting anywhere. He turned to some of the miners who were gathered in the yard. Waving his arms, he told the manager to cut their time, and added: "Sack them all, those men with my uniforms on, if they don't get to work."

Then Wheeler told our chairman, George Goodwillie, that the NCB had little intention of spending more money on Polmaise. His exact words were that he was going to "re-assess" the pit. Looking back, I would say

Polmaise miners in Perth after lobbying the NUM national conference, 7 July 1983

that this was when he decided Polmaise had to close – for the simple reason that over the years we had been solid behind strikes on all issues, and now we had lived up to our reputation over the Cardowan issue.

Then Wheeler issued his last command: "Lock the gates". He went away in his car and hasn't been back to Polmaise since. So started the first lock-out in the Scottish coalfield since the lock-out at Bothwell Castle colliery, Lanarkshire, during the war.

* * *

Men assembled for work on Thursday morning, and were sent home again. Some of the union men from Cardowan had come up to show their support. We went into the union hut to decide what to do. The national conference of the NUM was taking place at Perth, only 35 miles from Fallin. So at 7 a.m. I phoned Charlie Hulston, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) delegate for the Alexander's bus workers, and asked him for a bus. He drove it up himself. On the way up in the bus, the miners were so angry that they intended to go right in and interrupt the conference. If I hadn't been there they certainly would have done so. I was originally in favour of this too, but then I thought that the press might have used it against the miners' union as a whole.

We went right up to the front door of the conference, but didn't go in. We wanted to see Scargill, but McGahey ushered us into a room and then Bolton came and held a meeting with us. Bolton had phoned Edinburgh, to James Macdonald, the NCB's head of industrial relations; Bolton told us that Macdonald had agreed that, if we went back to the pit, the men would be working on the back shift. Whether Macdonald really told Bolton that, or whether Bolton simply told it to us when he knew we had no chance of getting down the pit, I don't know.

Looking back now – and bearing in mind what we found out during the miners' strike about how Bolton operated – I would say he was only bluffing us. The reason I say this is that, when we returned from the Perth conference to the pit and I told the pit manager what had happened, he phoned Industrial Relations at Edinburgh and got a different story. He told me that the men would be working on the back shift, *only if I went and personally got the boys from*

Cardowan to come and start at Polmaise – a request that was refused.

* * *

So the Polmaise miners remained locked-out – victimised because they stood four-square with the fight to keep Cardowan open.

The Cardowan miners were let down by other pits who took transferred men. At a delegate conference in Edinburgh on Wednesday July 13th, a resolution was passed stating: "We call upon Cardowan miners who have been transferred to return to their own colliery." But this turned out to be so much bluff, because transferred men were allowed into Castlehill, Bogside, Solsgirth and Seafield, in some cases with the NUM committee's agreement.

Despite the stand taken at Polmaise and elsewhere, the lack of a clear lead from the Scottish area took its toll at Cardowan. On Friday August 26th the NCB announced the pit was closing at 10 p.m. that night. The

Cardowan men, who had already voted in three previous ballots to resist closure, were balloted a fourth time by the union – and voted by 328 to 195 not to fight any further.

* * *

From the day we were locked out, the Polmaise NUM branch instructed its members to be at the pit at their normal shift hours. They came and gave their check numbers and said they were available for work. So it continued, day, back and night shift, for five weeks, including two weeks of the annual holidays.

After the holidays, we came back, and management instructions were that we were still locked out.

But then on the first Monday in August, the union committee was holding a meeting in the union box and one of the lads came in and told us: "That's the men down the pit." We knew nothing about this in advance. That was how the lock-out ended.

The only good thing to be said about the lock-out concerned our claim for repayment of money lost. We took our case through the NCB disputes procedure, claiming that we had been available for work. We claimed payment for all the shifts we had lost.

Such disputes start with the pit delegate meeting the manager – where, naturally, our claim was turned down. After this, as the delegate I sent the case to the NUM agent, Bolton. He met James Mackie, the NCB production manager, and again the claim was turned down. It then went on to Disputes, where McGahey as NUM area president and Macdonald of the Coal Board met, and Macdonald turned down the claim too. The next step after that is to the umpire, who at that time was Jack Kane, the former Lord Provost of Edinburgh. He upheld the miners' case, stating that they had made themselves available for work.

The NCB had to pay all the lost shifts: I think the full amount of money came to about £54,000 – and this was a sore point with them, mentioned on numerous occasions!

* * *

For 12 weeks, starting with the first shift after the lock-out, the men went down the pit but were prevented from working. The instruction from the manager was: pass the men down the pit, but there is no work for them to do. The development work was stopped. So we were just tidying up, lifting wood from one part of the pit and putting it in another. Nothing constructive was done at all.

With regard to industrial relations, management turned a somersault. They turned on us completely, and did everything possible to try and break up the NUM in the pit. I am not saying the pit manager took that decision himself; he must have been told at a higher level: "Just don't give the union an inch." Consultative and safety meetings – which had always been held regularly, in accordance with the national agreement for the industry – just stopped. They just would not hold them. We weren't allowed to hold meetings with the men in the pit yard as we had always done.

My own position as union delegate completely changed. Like other delegates before me, I hadn't had a job down the pit as such; my job was to work with management to make sure the pit ran smoothly and on certain days each week I was paid a shift by the union to do union business, and didn't go down the pit at all. There was no written agreement on this, it was just custom and practice built up over the years, with which management were quite happy. But straight after the lock-out, the manager sent for me,

George Goodwillie and Jim Armitage, and emphasised the point that if I was a minute late going down the pit, or up a minute early, he was instructed to sack me. I was put to work in a back mine.

As delegate, my duties included not only sorting out problems at the pit, but also organising concessionary coal and various benefits for the miners, pensioners, widows etc. Since we were the only pit left on this side of the river Forth, I dealt with all the beneficiaries in the area, 2,000 in all. This was practically a full time job, and once management instructed me to go down the pit full-time it was not unusual for me to have to stay on many hours after my shift. I would come in on the day shift at 7 a.m., and quite frequently not leave until 4 or 5 in the afternoon.

On numerous occasions, I put them to the test. I would come in on the day shift at 7 a.m., do my union duties, and then go down the pit at about 9 a.m., and come back up about 1 p.m. instead of 2 p.m.

* * *

For 17 weeks, nothing was done in the pit – five weeks' lock-out and twelve afterwards. Then Wheeler decided that mine-driving would be re-started. But industrial relations continued to be like guerrilla warfare.

The men were sent home twice, and had their pay cut, for holding union meetings. Management cut the drivage bonus, and there are detailed figures to prove it. I submitted 18 complaints, 16 of them on behalf of the entire workforce. For months, nothing happened about these, and then the manager called me in; I explained the first and second complaints, and he refused to discuss them. I refused to sign the minute of the meeting.

Here is another example of the sort of provocation we had to put up with: 15 men in the Companion mine – which was always cold, summer and winter – said they were going on strike because conditions were freezing and wet, and their demands for suitable clothing (which is specified in our national agreement) were turned down. After spending half an hour on the surface, they lost three hours' pay and a week's bonus of £40 in a management attempt to goad them into further strike action.

Incidentally: while the NCB were claiming we were "not co-operating" and there was a "lack of effort" at Polmaise, the miners were regularly earning high bonuses for their work.

* * *

Polmaise was not the only pit where management were adopting dictatorial tactics. At Monktonhall pit in Mid-Lothian, all development work was stopped, two sections were closed, and committee members stopped from doing their union work, as I had been. Then miners in a particular section were threatened with the sack if they didn't meet production targets – at a pit which according to the *Coal News* was the fourth-highest producing pit in Britain!

On Thursday September 15th 1983, the Monktonhall men went on strike. This fight lasted seven weeks, and we supported them with cash. We also told the Monktonhall NUM delegate, David Hamilton, that we would be prepared to come out on strike, although there was never any lead coming from the Scottish officials or executive committee

Monktonhall miners on strike, October 1983

regarding such supportive action for Monktonhall.

We thought Monktonhall was getting a raw deal from the union. Some of the Monktonhall miners told us: "No, we don't want you to come out on strike yourselves, there's no way you'll win it like that; we've got to try and win it at area level." But there was no way that the area leadership were interested.

During that strike the NCB tried to flood Monktonhall pit – as they did to nearly all the Scottish pits at one time or another. A few weeks later, we got a taste of that tactic too.

* * *

On Monday October 31st 1983, the miners began our national action in support of our pay claim, with a national overtime ban which included the withdrawal of safety cover. Everyone knew that the confrontation over closures was also looming large. During the overtime ban, safety cover in England was given by the pit deputies. Up here in Scotland, the deputies were prepared to do weekend safety cover also, but they were told by Scottish NCB management not to do any work normally done by other grades.

On the first weekend of the overtime ban, we told management we would not provide safety cover at Polmaise until there was an emergency. This was in line with national policy. At 7 a.m. on the Saturday morning, union officials were called from their homes to the pit. The manager had withdrawn the firemen who were down the pit; he was de-powering the mine. We said the moment he did that, we would term it an emergency and provide safety cover.

We went home at 10.30 a.m. At 11.30 a.m. the firemen were sent underground again; at 1 p.m. our craftsmen's delegate, Alan Rawdden, received a phone call from the senior oversman saying everything was OK. At 4 p.m. Rawdden phoned back to check, and was told the colliery was flooding. The manager had told the firemen to turn off all the pumps and fans, and switched off the electricity at 1 p.m.

At 4.30 p.m. we arrived at the pit and offered safety cover. It took the management until 7 p.m. to agree. Then we started the pumps and serious flooding was avoided.

Some weeks later, men got leaflets in their lockers on the Friday, saying that the pit would be allowed to flood, and not recovered, if safety cover was not provided over the weekend.

On the Saturday morning at 6 a.m., the Friday night-shift men came up the pit and no miners were left underground. The union committee members were in the miners' welfare. We discussed how quickly the water could come up if the pit flooded. The only piece of equipment of any value actually endangered by the water was the Enco-shovel in the Companion mine. The men who had come off the night shift told us where it was and we knew that it would be Monday morning before the water level could reach it and create an emergency.

At 9 a.m. we went to see the management – but we couldn't get in. The pit gates were locked with big heavy padlocks. The senior oversman was on the Coal Board side of the gate. We asked him what was happening and he said: "I've not to let you in." So that was our second lock-out.

We told the senior oversman that if there was any problem – not just flooding, but any problems at all that would endanger the pit and required manpower – he could get in touch with us.

We didn't know then, but we know now, that their intentions were to shut the pit. On the Saturday night at 6 p.m., the senior oversman on the back shift phoned me and said he wanted men at the pit. I contacted our secretary Jim Armitage, who had the phone numbers of the available men. Just as I put the phone down, my phone rang again… it was the senior oversman again, saying that the manager didn't want men until six o'clock the next morning.

Then just before I left the house that night, he phoned yet again, saying the manager didn't want men until Monday morning day shift. Eventually, however, an emergency was declared at the pit on the Sunday, and pumping began. The Coal Board issued a press statement about all this which we thought total lies. I was interviewed on TV, along with a press officer from the Coal Board who wouldn't have known a pit from a double-decker bus.

The Coal Board said we had refused safety cover, which was not true. They said that millions of pounds' worth of damage had been done to machinery at Polmaise – but in fact there was no damage whatsoever, because there was no water near the machinery. The

men who had been down on Friday back shift had seen to that.

The only part of the pit flooded was the deepest part, that is the main mine, and once the pumps were started up, that water was pumped out within three or four hours. The Enco-shovel was tested by electricians and engineers and found to be in working order. On the following Tuesday, the management said it was "flood damaged" and had to be dismantled and brought up the pit. We refused to do this.

There really wasn't an emergency at the pit – it was just that the NCB had decided to have another go at the Polmaise miners.

* * *

The following week the pit worked from 6 a.m. on Saturday morning to 7 a.m. on Monday morning with pumps switched on underground but not manned. This is against the law, and we approached management about it. We also took the case to the NUM.

Nothing came out of this. And yet we had had men sacked at Polmaise previously for leaving pumps unattended. And during the miners' strike, Bobby Purdie and Rob Curley, who were working the pumps in accordance with safety procedures, were sacked for refusing to leave those pumps. That case is dealt with later in this book. But the point is this: it was these same pumps that the management allowed to run for a full weekend in December 1983, unattended.

We found ourselves playing this game of cat-and-mouse with management because we adhered strictly to the terms of the national overtime ban – that no safety cover was to be provided except in emergencies. There were many heated discussions about this within the unions at Polmaise and all these discussions ended with a decision to stand firm.

As our minute book stated for November 25th 1983: "It was decided that if we didn't back the union, we would be backing the bosses." But in some other Scottish pits, the overtime ban wasn't observed as it should have been. This was stated by McGahey and Eric Clarke (the Scottish area NUM secretary) at a delegate conference held during the overtime ban, although they didn't come out and name the branches concerned.

My interpretation of this is that the Scottish executive had agreed on national NUM policy, but were in no way trying to enforce it. They were quite happy with pits breaking this code, doing safety work. Nothing was done to stop cover being given.

4. Polmaise and Bogside

The Coal Board announced their proposal to close Polmaise on December 13th 1983. At that time £15.8 million had just been spent on the redevelopment programme and we were nearly ready to resume production. There were 1,350,000 tons of coal almost ready to be mined and total reserves of 9 million tons in the area.

Apart from all the machinery in the pit, they had refurbished the old railway line which ran from the pit, along the back of the village, to Stirling. This line alone must have cost £750,000 – but they never ran a train on it and in the end the track was lifted for scrap.

"The closure of Polmaise represents a net loss of 700 jobs," stated a report drawn up by Stirling district council during the strike. They were counting the 260 Polmaise miners, plus an extra 440 who would have been employed once production re-started.

"An operational pit creates a demand in the wider economy for power, timber, materials, transport services etc.," the report pointed out. "Therefore, the Polmaise jobs would directly support 34 per cent more jobs in the wider economy.

The report said that, within a 4.5 kilometre radius of Polmaise, there were seven areas of major urban deprivation: Fallin, Cowie, Plean and four parts of Stirling itself. These areas were among the poorest 10 per cent of Scotland: they already had 36 per cent unemployment, 48 per cent youth unemployment and 64.2 per cent of families having to claim housing benefit.

When they announced that Polmaise was to close, there were 5,000 out of work in Stirling district, and only 283 vacancies. "If Polmaise closes, this situation can only deteriorate", said the district council's report

– and it has. The impact on Central Region as a whole was also the subject of warnings to the Coal Board. Unemployment in the region was above the Scottish national average. Stirling and Falkirk, the two main population centres, had suffered a massive reduction in manufacturing jobs in the ten years from 1971 to 1981.

The case for Polmaise in black and white, presented by (left to right) Willie Bone (NACODS), John McCormack (NUM), Alex McNeil (NUM), Tam Perrie (former NUM member), Jim Stevenson (NACODS) and Willie Glen (NACODS chairman)

The report on the Scottish coal industry by George Kerevan and Richard Savile, published in January 1985, said: "The relative scale of the termination of Polmaise in terms of the Central Region, is approaching that of shutting down the whole NCB for the UK economy." The Coal Board went ahead with it nevertheless.

In February 1985 a delegation from the Region, led by the vice-convenor John Hendry, went to Brussels to make the case for EEC money to be spent in the area. I went on this delegation, and although we weren't there only to argue the case for the pit, we certainly made the point about the pit while we were there.

* * *

Once the Coal Board had announced their decision to shut Polmaise, they justified it by talking about "geological faults" and "flooding". But when confronted with the fact that this was all nonsense, through the press and at meetings with McGahey, they came out and said that the pit was being closed because there was no market for the coal. The NUM branch pointed out that on this basis, no pit in the British coalfield was safe. We called on the Coal Board to open their books and justify the closure.

On Friday January 13th 1984 there was a meeting between Scottish area Coal Board management and the mining unions at the Board's headquarters in Edinburgh. They proposed that the Polmaise miners start transferring to the Longannet complex on the following Monday morning. When this was reported to the local NUM branch, we told them to go and take a running jump. They promised there would be no compulsory redundancies. But we knew that the promises were hollow, as they had been at Kinneil and Cardowan. Men from there had been offered jobs at a lower grade, or jobs in a pit 40 miles away with no transport provided – and as far as I am concerned, such offers were compulsory redundancies by any other name. We weren't having it.

On Saturday January 14th we held a joint meeting of all unions at the pit: the NUM, SCEBTA and the National Association of Colliery Officials, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS). There were also delegations there from Bogside and Castlehill pits. The decision was unanimous – to fight.

The following Saturday, January 21st, Arthur Scargill was visiting Castlehill colliery and afterwards came to a press conference in Fallin miners' welfare club. He accused the Coal Board of planning to close half the Scottish coalfield with the loss of 7,000 jobs.

A conference of Scottish pit secretaries and delegates was held, on Monday January 23rd 1984, in Edinburgh, and I reported the position at the pit. "Explaining that the Area director had intimated that they intended to close the colliery because of alleged serious geological faults and recalling that there had been major development work to allow the mining of coal between the Throsk and Bandeath faults, Mr McCormack stated that any problem that existed could be

surmounted and that already they had in fact broken through the first fault," say the minutes.

"Referring in detail to the development work which had been carried out at the colliery, to the Longcarse fault in the main north mine which should be mined to prove the coal reserves, to the considerable amount of coal which was available for extraction from other developments ensuring the continued existence of the colliery over the next 4-5 years, and to the proposed extended Consultative Committee meeting which would be held to discuss the future of the colliery, Mr McCormack stated that in his view Polmaise was not being closed due to geological faults but due to victimisation on the part of the Board and to the fact that there were no markets for the coal. ...

"Reiterating the decision of the workforce that no-one would accept redundancy or transfer, and demanding support from Conference, Mr McCormack stated that in the battle to retain Polmaise as a viable unit, and to prevent further job losses in the Scottish Area, he hoped that consideration would be given by the Scottish Area Officials to convening a Joint Conference of Secretaries and Delegates of the NUM (Scottish area) and SCEBTA, or a Joint Meeting of Branch Officials and Committee Members in the near future. ..."

Mick McGahey said: "It was quite clear that the closure of Polmaise was to cut back production, in order to meet market requirements in line with the policy of the Board nationally", and he warned Conference that if a developing pit like Polmaise could be closed, there were no safe pits in the Scottish coalfield. McGahey said an immediate pithead campaign would be waged to "declare support" for the Polmaise men, as well as joint meetings of branch officials and committee members of all the Scottish mining unions.

"Steps would also be taken to involve the local authorities and MPs in this fight, a fight involving Scott Lithgow shipyard and Albion Motors, Bathgate, which in addition to the closure of Polmaise would lead to thousands of jobs being sacrificed in the Scottish economy, an economy which belonged to the Scottish people not the Tory government, and a fight in which the Scottish people must also be involved, leading to a convention of the Scottish people where the trade union and labour movement, political parties and all sections of society including the churches would be involved."

The proposal for a pithead campaign was agreed. But four days later, the Coal Board showed that they were fighting dirty – at Bogside mine in Fife.

* * *

That Friday, January 27th, twelve men at Bogside – who had been working well enough to have been making bonus regularly – were accused of being "incompetent and incapable of producing results" and were downgraded. The day-shift went on strike; safety cover was withdrawn.

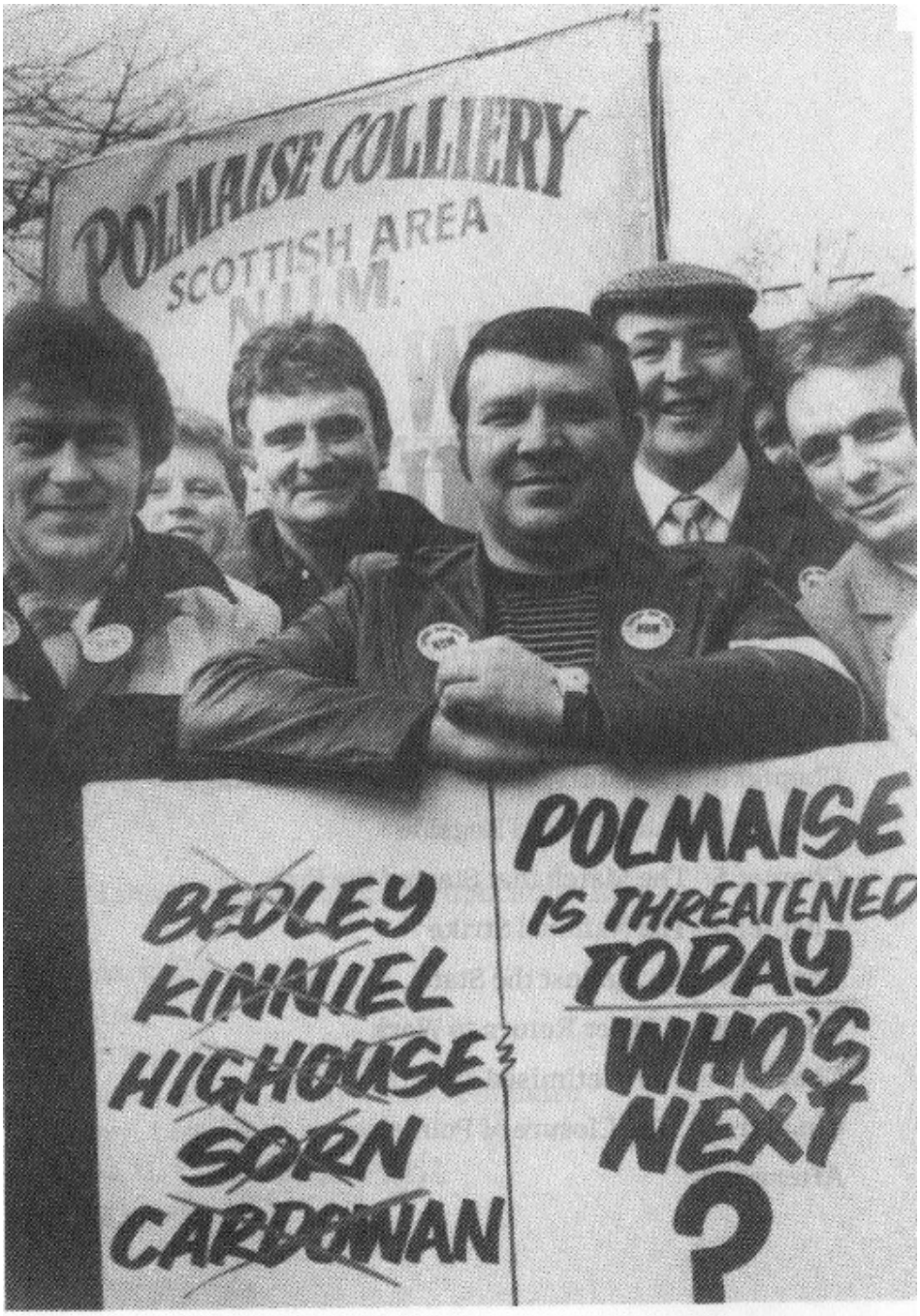
The night-shift men came on and agreed to join the strike. The manager issued notices saying the mine would be immediately de-powered.

An article in the *Scottish Miner* by Simon Martin, the Bogside NUM branch secretary, and Peter Neilsen, the Bogside SCEBTA secretary, told what happened next: "Representation was immediately made to members of BACM and NACODS not to de-power the mine. BACM reaffirmed their intentions to carry out only their normal duties and abide by the manager's decisions. ..."

"NACODS at first took the same view. Pickets were then established across the entrances to the three mines at Bogside. NACODS members then showed their willingness to cross picket lines by proceeding to their work. Management however recalled these officials and instructed them to wait in the mine conference room. Police were then summoned to the mine. NUM and SCEBTA branch officials were then reminded of the law relating to picketing, and were asked to withdraw their members."

The pickets withdrew. Again an appeal was made to the NACODS men not to follow the management instruction to de-power the mine. They would not listen. The management were trying to get the union liaison committee chairman to accept a letter stating that if the

pit flooded, it would be the committee's fault. At 6 p.m. a state of emergency was declared at Bogside. The mine was starting to flood. Within half an hour there were the necessary supervisory electricians and engineers – members of SCEBTA – there to start pumps, ventilators and the main surface fan.



Polmaise miners ask "Who's next?"... April 1984

Management had turned off the compressor for the main surface fan. Eventually the engineers found that a little-known and never-used valve had been shut off – although they never found out who did this. At 9 p.m. they phoned the manager, imploring him to come and re-start the surface fan. He wouldn't. So things dragged on and on over the weekend. Several sections of the pit were flooding.

For the whole of the following week, no attempt was made to recover the mine. *"Why was the mine de-powered when supervisory, electrical and engineering staff were in attendance?"* asked Simon Martin and Peter Neilsen in their article. *"Why was there no action to recover the mine for a whole week following flooding? By what right does a group of people deliberately destroy a public asset?"*

This was the Coal Board showing how far they were prepared to go. I don't know anything about Bogside in mining terms, about whether it had a long life or whether there was much coal – but regardless of that, the Coal Board must have said to themselves, "We'll use this as an example." This was only the start of these dirty tricks by the Coal Board, with managers at pits switching off the power for the pumps. We had more of that during the miners' strike – things being done which we had not previously believed possible. Even the local management turned on the miners like never before.

It was a Mexican stand-off. The Coal Board had the law on their side, and they were using it. What could the Bogside NUM have done? If they had done anything, they would have been jailed. You are not allowed down a pit without permission from the manager, unless you are passed in by firemen. And the manager was not giving that permission.

Although Bogside was only partially flooded, the Coal Board wasted no time. On Saturday February 4th, they announced it was to be closed. I remember talking to the Bogside delegate, Jim McCallum (who had gone there after Kinneil closed). He said that the word came from the Coal Board that it was "one or t'other, P45 or redundancy".

The Scottish area NUM recommended to the men that they accept redundancy or take their P45s. They said there was no alternative.

5. The match that started the fire

On Saturday February 4th, with the news of the Bogside closure fresh in their minds, the Polmaise miners held a stormy three-hour branch meeting.

One man put a resolution to go on strike immediately; before he could sit down, ten were seconding it. The branch committee had, the week previously, planned to picket all the Scottish pits out on strike, but now we asked the men to hold off until we saw what the strategy of the NUM Scottish area was to be, because we wanted an area strike. In the end it was agreed to go for this.

There was to be a conference of all pit secretaries and delegates on Monday February 13th, where the increasingly serious situation in the coalfield was to be discussed. The executive wanted a one-day strike, and on the weekend before the meeting, Bolton, McGahey and Clarke came to Polmaise, to try to convince us to accept a one-day strike and abandon our call for all-out action.

On the Saturday morning, February 11th, we held another NUM branch meeting. The men realised that the Coal Board's intention was to shut the pit. They knew if they sat back, the pit would shut – because of what had happened in the coalfield in the recent past. This meeting mandated the branch officials to press for an all-out strike of the Scottish coalfield. The branch minutes record a decision that "no action will be taken until the special delegates' conference has been held and the leadership forced to identify themselves in the struggle to save Polmaise".

News of this got back to the Scottish area leadership very quickly. They phoned through to us on the Saturday night, at the miners' club. Then all three area officials (McGahey, Bolton and Clarke) turned up at the miners' club at nine on the Sunday morning, to try and convince us that the one-day strike was the right tactic to adopt. But our branch members had met and taken their decision for an all-out strike. The area officials said we couldn't go it alone, we had to get the full backing of the Scottish area before it could go any further. But everyone knows that to start a fire somebody's got to strike a match. Our men were getting pushed about in the pit, left, right and centre; I was getting a hard time from men at the pit because we weren't on strike; they wanted to go out.

* * *

When the delegates' and secretaries' conference took place on the Monday morning, the executive came in with a proposal for a one-day strike and a lobby of parliament: the gentle-touch approach throughout. But they were forced to change their decision, to leave the door open for an all-out strike.

They were forced by our branch decision and by two bus-loads of our men who went up and lobbied the meeting, saying, "We're here to back the delegate up; we're going on strike; that's what's happening whether it gets passed today or not."

McGahey opened the meeting. "The president stated that this was possibly one of the most important conferences convened in the Scottish coalfield for a considerable time and arose out of the situation in the industry, the operation of the overtime ban, and the threatened closures of Polmaise and Bogside collieries. A successful pithead campaign had been conducted in the Scottish area and at the conclusion of the conference, branches would be requested to indicate their votes for action in accordance with the decisions taken at branch meetings during the weekend of 11th and 12th February. ...

"He referred to the position at Polmaise, which would be the subject of a National Review meeting, and to Bogside, where the Board had refused cover in order to save the pit – a pit which, in its present position, the union's mining engineers could not justify continuing, but which required development of the mines to the west of the colliery – and underlined the necessity of a united campaign throughout the coalfield."

This last remark about Bogside, that the "union's mining engineers could not justify continuing" there, showed that the NUM Scottish area leadership had already accepted the fact it was shutting down. This was a blow to the Bogside miners and the Scottish miners generally.

"Mr J. McCormack, Fallin, apologising to any Secretary, Delegate or executive

committee member who had had difficulty in gaining entry to the hall by lobbiers from Polmaise, stated that he was quite certain Conference would understand the anger of the men," the minutes record.

"Referring to the situation at Bogside, where he understood that men were now being informed by the Board that if they did not accept transfer, they would receive their P45, and deploring the tactics which were being adopted by the Board, Mr McCormack stated that this was a situation which could equally occur at Polmaise, if immediate all-out action was not taken.

"He stated that he had been mandated to advise Conference that a one-day stoppage, with further action as the situation developed, was not enough, and that in order to prevent fragmentation within the colliery, immediate all-out strike action should take place throughout the Scottish coalfield. Explaining the determination of the Polmaise members in order to win the support of the Scottish miners for their justifiable case, Mr McCormack stated that he fully understood the feelings expressed by the leadership in that unity must be maintained, a feeling which must however be reciprocated to the men at Polmaise. ...

"Stressing the need for the membership to stand up and be counted, Mr McCormack stated that his branch would be prepared to accept the recommendation from the executive committee provided this was a call for all-out strike action."

So we weren't accepting the one-day strike. We wanted all-out action. And here was the response:

"The president [Mick McGahey], in summing up the discussion, reiterated that the recommendation now before Conference was for a one-day stoppage on Monday 20th February, and to empower the executive Committee to take further action as the situation developed. The branch officials, committee members and executive committee members had fought hard for a decision for action at the special branch meetings convened during the recent weekend, including those that had been rejected. ...

"He stated that while Polmaise and Bogside had been discussed at the national executive committee meeting on Thursday 9th February, based on the report he had made to the meeting, it was quite clear that so far as the other coalfields were concerned, there was not as yet a feeling for escalation in that they had conditioned themselves to the fact that the overtime ban was biting and having an effect, the maximum punishment being imposed on the Board at minimal cost to the members.

"It was essential, therefore, in light of this situation, that any action taken in the Scottish coalfield should be in unity, thereafter winning national action of the miners, and with this in view he hoped that Conference would accept the recommendation of the executive committee to continue the pithead campaign, calling for a one day stoppage on Monday 20th February with powers to take further action as the situation developed. ...

"Mr J. McCormack, Fallin, recalling the mandate from his branch and paying tribute to the leadership given by the Scottish area officials, urged that the recommendation from the executive committee should call for an all-out and not a one-day stoppage. ...

"Mr J. McCallum, Bogside, paid tribute to the leadership given by the Scottish area officials and executive committee members, and also proposed that the call should be for an all-out stoppage."

"The president, reiterating the recommendation of the executive committee [that is, for a one-day strike], stated that if accepted, a special recall conference of secretaries and delegates would be convened on Tuesday 21st February and not an executive committee meeting as had previously been intimated ...

"He appealed to Conference to understand the rationale of the executive committee recommendation, in this very difficult situation, in order to carry the membership. ...

"At this stage the president proceeded to take the branch vote for or against the executive committee recommendation, but failed to complete the vote, the delegates of Fallin and Bogside insisting that the recall Conference on Monday 20th February should be convened to receive reports on a call for an all-out stoppage in the Scottish coalfield.

"Several other delegates took part in the ensuing discussion, it being thereafter agreed unanimously by Conference to continue the pithead campaign on the question of industrial action in the Scottish coalfield, and to convene a Special Recall Conference of Secretaries and delegates on Monday 20th

February to discuss all-out industrial action in the Scottish coalfield."

Inside the Polmaise union office: standing, left to right, are Ian Perrie, Jock Perrie, James Rennie jnr, John Hotchkiss and Eddie Hutton; seated, left to right, are John Rennie, Alex Ross, James Armitage, John McCormack, James McCormack, and George Goodwillie

The area officials and executive didn't want a strike, they wanted the one-day stoppage as a token gesture. But McGahey never got to take the vote for that. With the whole issue postponed until the following week, time had to be used to win more support for the all-out strike action that we wanted. Both Jim McCallum and I addressed meetings of miners at those pits which had not voted for action, to try and convince them to change their minds. I headed for Killoch and Barony in Ayrshire, and Bilston Glen and Monktonhall in the Lothians.

* * *

We got up to the Ayrshire pits – myself, George Goodwillie, and the secretary of the Polmaise SCEBTA branch, Allan Rawdden. There were display cards up, with a picture of me, and one of my wife's hotel in Aberfoyle, and writing which asked: why should the miners believe this man when he is sitting with a hotel worth over £100,000? The same happened at Bilston Glen and Monktonhall. The placards were a cutting from the *Glasgow Herald*, blown up by the Coal Board so they were about 2ft by 2ft [60 cm x 60 cm].

Before writing their story, the *Glasgow Herald* had been to the hotel in Aberfoyle and harassed my wife. They had been to Fallin to my next-door neighbour, a Mr McCall, and asked him and his wife how they got on with people like me. He told them that he and his wife couldn't get a better neighbour and to get on their horse. The story about the hotel is very simple. It was left to my wife by her brother. We had it all the time that I played football with Falkirk, which was from 1953 until 1960 (I was with them when they won the Scottish Cup, working in the pit at the same time). In fact we had it nearly all the time that I worked in the pit. Many a person in my position would have packed up the pit years ago, and gone to work in the hotel full time. But I was a miner all my days, and I couldn't get away from the pit. The hotel to me was always secondary and it was my wife who always worked there. In fact it wouldn't matter to me if I had ten hotels, I would still be part of the working class.

Having a hotel isn't a crime, of course! Six or seven years before the strike, the Coal Board's own newspaper, the *Coal News*, came up and took photos of myself and my wife working in the hotel. But when we were fighting the closure of Polmaise, the Coal Board took a different view, and tried to use the fact that I had a hotel against me. That was why the story appeared.

It so happens that we did not convince the Ayrshire miners we were addressing to support an all-out strike. But this was not because of these placards. Not once did any of the local men refer to them. In fact at some of the pits they had taken them down, and only put them up again so that the delegation from Polmaise could see what we were up against.

At a later date, during the miners' strike, two reporters from the *Glasgow Herald* came to the pit and I had to do everything in my power to stop the miners from turning their car on its side! When they said they were

from the *Glasgow Herald* there was pandemonium.

* * *

The next NUM area secretaries' and delegates' conference was held on the following Monday, February 20th, at Edinburgh. All the previous week, I had been having trouble at the pit stopping the men coming out on strike. We had decided at a branch meeting that, whatever happened, we would come out ourselves on the Tuesday, February 21st.

We agreed that on the Monday, anybody who wanted to work could do so, and those who wanted to lobby the NUM meeting would be taken to Edinburgh by bus. Nobody worked: all 260 Polmaise men were out – although none of us dreamed we would still be out 56 weeks later.

As the secretaries' and delegates' conference assembled at the Royal British Hotel, a lobby of a hundred Polmaise miners blocked the entrance for 40 minutes before the meeting could begin.

A number of the large pits had voted for strike action: but there were still some where a majority for strike action had not been achieved. It was the delegates from these pits that the Polmaise miners were angry with.

When the meeting finally began, McGahey was first to speak. "Recalling the decision of the Special Conference of Secretaries and Delegates held on Monday 13th February the President paid tribute to his co-officials, executive Committee members and branch officials, including the representatives of Fallin and Bogside branches who had addressed a further round of pithead meetings in order to explain the union's case and who had fought a valiant battle.

"The reality of life, however, was that despite this, the hearts and minds of the Scottish miners had not been won for industrial action and while he personally had not lost heart, it was evident that a tremendous task lay ahead to convince the members to take united action ... when, according to the press, it had been forecast that a further 20 pit closures would take place this year with a further loss of 20,000 jobs."

"Reporting that the meeting which had been postponed to discuss Bogside colliery would be rearranged, the President stated it was essential to have a strategy that would create the conditions for maximum unity throughout the coalfield, at the same time developing the public campaign in order to exert pressure on the Board at area and national level, and on the government, to stop the closure of Polmaise and Bogside collieries and in defence of Scotland's coal mining industry as a whole. ...

"He reported that at a special meeting earlier that day, the executive committee had agreed unanimously to recommend that Polmaise Colliery should be declared on strike as from Tuesday 21st February, that a call be made to the national executive committee to recognise the strike as official, that an appeal be made to the Scottish and British miners and to the wider labour and trade union movement to give moral and financial support to the Polmaise miners, and that the executive committee be empowered to call for action as and when appropriate. ..."

That was the proposal: we were to be on strike on our own.

"Mr J. McCormack, Fallin, stated that having addressed the members of Monktonhall, Bilston and Barony, he rejected any criticism of the branch officials at these collieries, branch officials who had fought hard to convince the membership of the need to take action.

"On behalf of his branch he pledged full support for the recommendations submitted by the executive committee, recommendations which he believed could prevent fragmentation and bring about unity throughout the coalfield in support of Polmaise and Bogside. He agreed with the call for a public inquiry and the necessity of broadening the public campaign involving the communities and local authorities and welcomed the fact that a public rally would be held in Stirling. [This had been organised by Rowland Sheret of the Stirling trades council.]

"Apologising for the action of certain of his members following last week's and prior to today's conference, he agreed with the remarks that had been made by the President that their wrath should have been directed towards the NCB and not the leadership of the NUM Scottish area)." I must say it should be added, now, that at times like this the NUM Scottish area leadership needed wrath directed at them from the membership.

At the end of the meeting, the Polmaise miners broke in and attached the top table where McGahey and Bolton were. Those men

The Polmaise banner at a lobby of the NUM national executive, 1984

wanted an all-out strike by the whole Scottish coalfield. I had to restrain them. I told them that the Scottish executive had agreed that Polmaise would be on strike, that they would contact the NEC to make that official, and that other pits were to go back and hold meetings and work for all-out action. This was at least a step in the right direction.

* * *

So that was how we came out – the first pit in the British coalfield on strike against closures in 1984-1985.

We were going it alone because our area leadership would not call the other pits out. Although there was not a majority of pits committed to action, thousands of Scottish miners had voted to strike. If the Scottish executive had called for action at this stage, I am sure the miners would have supported them. And of course when they *did* start talking about all-out strike the support was there – but they only did that after the national strike began.

I believe that if the miners hadn't come out on strike down in Yorkshire, three weeks after we did, our fight would just have been allowed to peter out, the same as Kinneil and Cardowan. We would have been left to fight ourselves, and then they would have held a meeting and told us – as they told Kinneil and Cardowan – that there was no support. That was always the get-out for the executive: "You cannot go it alone"; "There is not enough support from the membership." We would have been shut down, if the national strike hadn't intervened.

Of course we didn't know at that time that we were on the eve of the national strike. We just got on with organising ourselves as effectively as we could. In the first week of our strike, Rowland Sheret, Rab McAllan, Robbie Robertson and other representatives of the Stirling trades council came to the pit. They gave us tremendous support.

A delegation to London was organised. James Armitage and myself travelled down, together with representatives of the Stirling district and Central regional councils, to see George Younger, who was secretary of state for Scotland at the time, and then to Coal Board headquarters to see Ian MacGregor, the Coal Board chairman.

First we met Younger, and told him Polmaise was a viable unit and all the rest of it – but basically he didn't want to know. He

was, after all, part of the government which was trying to force through the pit closure programme. (Much later on, in January 1985, after we had been on strike for 11 months, there was a huge demonstration to support the miners in George Square, Glasgow. After the rally, a delegation organised by the Scottish TUC, and including local authority and church leaders, went to see Younger. I was invited to take part, but I refused; as far as I was concerned, Younger's position was quite clear and any further discussion with him was a waste of time and a charade.)

Then we arrived at the front door of NCB headquarters at Hobart House, and the commissionaire approached myself and Jim Armitage, and told us that as we were representing miners who were now on strike, MacGregor was not prepared to meet us. We were put out of the door: they didn't even let us wait in the foyer while the rest of the delegation saw MacGregor!

During those first couple of weeks, we had no idea which way our struggle was going to go. Then on Monday March 5th there was a rally at the Albert Hall at Stirling, at which Arthur Scargill spoke. We got word – not in the meeting itself, but in discussions with Scargill afterwards – that the pits in Yorkshire were on the verge of coming out on strike, and that with us being out on strike here, the thing would snowball.

The morning after that meeting, Tuesday March 6th, the Coal Board's closure programme was announced; 20,000 jobs were to be destroyed in the following year, and that was only a start. Scargill's warnings were confirmed from the horse's mouth. By the end of the week, Scotland, Yorkshire, Durham, Kent and South Wales were out with the official support of the national executive – and the strike was spreading.

6. The national strike

We were solid during the strike at Polmaise. There was not a single attempt at scabbing throughout the whole year. No-one even tried to get to their work, so we didn't need a picket line.

We only mounted a few pickets at the beginning of the strike, at the request of the Polmaise NACODS branch. They were working, but agreed with us that they would only use the men needed for safety purposes, between four and six men per shift. The picket was to check how many men worked. It also meant that the NACODS members who turned up, and were turned back by pickets, were still paid their wages.

Among the strikers, the older men had been on strike before and had an idea, in a roundabout way, of the hardships we would face. But they didn't realise what kind of strike this was, or that it would be as hard as it actually was in the end.

The young men had never been on strike before, but they were game for it. In the sense that they had a goal to go for, they were quite happy. And although they didn't enjoy all the things that happened to them, they didn't go through it with their faces down, saying, "This is no use". They enjoyed the involvement.

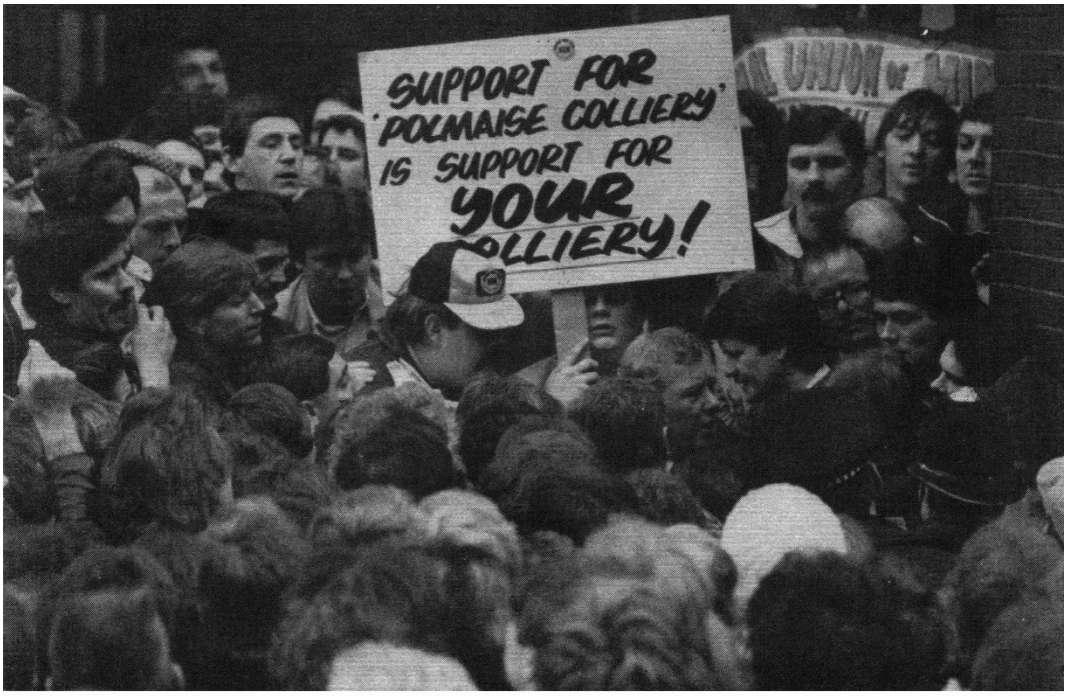
You couldn't get a finer bunch of people than the men who were active during the strike at Polmaise.

There was wee Jock Perrie, who died after the strike. He was a Justice of the Peace. He did a great job in the union; he was the branch secretary, and when Jim Armitage took over that job Jock became minutes secretary.

There was Alex Ross, "Mucker" to us all, who worked as a baths attendant at the pit. There were three shifts of baths attendants, who were part of the safety cover at the pit, and "Mucker" agreed to work constant night shift. But in fact he spent the night in the union office, attending the phone. In the evenings the union hut was usually full of miners anyway, especially the young ones.

The phone was manned 24 hours a day throughout the strike, and a rota system worked out to cover it. During the day, it was generally James Muir and Frank Weston, who died after the strike, who watched the phone.

Another man who was a hell of a character was big Norrie Lean. He runs an amateur football team up at St Ninians now, but he's not working. At one of the meetings we went to in Edinburgh, before the miners' strike, the Polmaise pickets got there early to lobby those delegates and secretaries who were not supporting the fight against closures. The pickets wouldn't let these delegates into the meeting. I was in the hall, and some of the executive members came up and asked me to



Ray Chadburn, NUM Executive member representing Nottinghamshire scabs, lobbied by Polmaise miners, March 8th 1984... (Norrie Lean is in the hat)

"call the wolves off" etc. I said the men outside were nothing to do with me, that I couldn't tell them what to do. I said that the only way I could get those pickets to lay off was if I could get permission to invite them into the meeting, to sit at the back in the balcony. At first I was told no, but eventually this was agreed. Big Norrie always figured in such incidents; most people didn't like arguing with him!

John Hotchkiss, who lives at St Ninians, was one of our committee members: together with Jim Armitage he looked after the safety rotas and decided who would cover which shifts. Geordie Goodwillie, who was the NUM chairman during the strike, still works in the pits; he was only 48 when he was made redundant and didn't want to stop working. Alan Rawdden, who was the SCEBTA delegate at Polmaise, now works in the chipboard factory at Cowie.

Then there were the young men. James Rennie, who was the youth delegate, is still in the pits and active in the union; his father is one of the sacked men. Johnny Rennie, his cousin – whose father was a deputy at Polmaise – is still active too. There was my nephew Robert McCormack; Dickie Maxwell, who worked at Castlehill but lived in Fallin, and still works in the pits; Robert Armitage, James's son. It was all the more of a shame to see the pit shut, having these men coming into union activity, learning the right way of doing things.

With men like this at the back of us, the union committee had to stick to decisions taken, and fight for those decisions. There was no playing around when you had them to answer to.

It was not just the miners and their wives who were active in the strike. Some of the young unemployed lads in the village worked with us throughout the year. Then there was Hughie Kerr, a young man who was a member of the Labour Party here locally, who worked night and day for the miners. He even got up to go on picket lines early in the morning, demonstrating his solidarity with the miners, and then came back to Fallin to go to his work at eight in the morning.

* * *

During the strike, we had a liaison committee comprising all unions in the pit except NACODS – that is SCEBTA, the Colliery Officials and Staff Association (COSA) and NUM Group One, which was by far the largest union. The NACODS delegates wouldn't attend, even though they were invited. The liaison committee meetings were held on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, in the union office. Then on Friday afternoon there was a full meeting of all members, when they were informed of what was happening up and down the coalfield – although many of them were finding out what was going on anyway, on a daily basis.

We were well organised: everybody knew their duties and carried them out. We sent flying pickets all over the coalfield, not just in Scotland but England also – and during the strike we paid out hundreds of pounds per week to Alexander's bus group and various other transport firms for taking us on picket duty. We also had our own picket van which did thousands upon thousands of miles. The Polmaise pickets were nicknamed "the piranhas" by the police, and it was something that stuck right through the miners' strike.

At the start we picketed mainly Bilston Glen colliery, some small private mines, and then Ravenscraig steelworks and Hunterston ore terminal in Ayrshire. As the strike went on we then had to start picketing Castlehill and some of the other pits.

Polmaise miners' wives committee members, left to right: Isobel Jarvie, Anne Kirkwood and Margaret Armitage

Bilston Glen was a sore point. Some of the men there scabbed all through the strike and this was the main attraction for pickets. There were quite a lot of scuffles, men arrested, buses turned back ... more of this happened at Bilston Glen than anywhere else in Scotland. Because a few miners there were working almost from the start, they got maximum publicity from the press who weren't in favour of the striking miners.

Our problems with scabbing in Scotland were minor in comparison with England. Some of the men in Nottingham, Staffordshire, Leicestershire and these places who worked during the miners' strike had never had any intention of fighting Maggie Thatcher's government: they came from a long line of blacklegs. Plus they had fallen into the traps laid by her government. Maybe some would have liked to come out on strike, but they didn't. The Polmaise NUM minutes of our branch meeting on March 19th 1984 well expressed our feelings: "There was a distinct air of gloom over this meeting as the traitors of Nottingham had decided not to join the miners' strike. There was also the problem of 8,000 police being inflicted on these areas to stop pickets. It seems Britain is being turned into a police state by the Thatcher government. It would appear that our freedoms are at stake."

I felt very sorry for the ones who did come out on strike in Nottingham. It wasn't easy for them.

The strike started in a series of areas and was spread by picketing. After six weeks, on April 19th 1984, the NUM executive met in Sheffield and made the national strike official. This executive decision was later ruled illegal in the High Court, and the national union was threatened with the sequestration of £707,000 of its funds because it refused to comply with the court order to reverse the decision.

We sent a strong delegation to lobby the meeting, because we knew that Ray Chadburn, and others who were opposed to the strike, would be there. This was one of the first times the Polmaise NUM branch banner made an appearance. We had never felt the need to have one before the strike, but once we were out, there were fairly regular demonstrations so we paid to have it made. The Polmaise banner was nowhere near as grand as many of the NUM branch banners – but it was one of the better-known ones, because it was never missing from demonstrations throughout the strike.

* * *

The miners' strike was not just picketing. There were many other aspects to it and many other people involved. Our main support group here in Fallin was the women's group. Anne Kirkwood was the chair; also active were Isobel Jarvie, Margaret Armitage, Cissy Craig and Martha McCallum. They played an important part: they organised themselves to go out and collect money and foodstuffs; they had a caravan in Stirling which was a collecting point. They really pulled their weight. We had good committees, both on the women's side and on the miners' side, who worked together.

The women's support was important for another reason: you knew that men who were

out on strike had their wives supporting them, that nobody was going home from the picket lines and then getting into arguments when they arrived home. It's not that anybody had given up with previous strikes because his wife didn't agree with it; the point was that the 1984-1985 strike was far, far longer than any previous strike, and therefore it was essential to have the whole family actively involved.

We also had good assistance from the Stirling district council: they gave rent rebates and free leisure and recreation facilities to the striking miners and their families. In July 1984 the district council organised a trip to the seaside and Edinburgh zoo for miners' children from the local strike centres. Plus we also got help from the Central regional council: they gave regular donations to each strike centre's hardship fund to be used by the miners' families.

There were other support groups established outside mining areas which also played a tremendous role – attending meetings and rallies, giving cash etc. In fact we would not have sustained the strike for as long as we did without the help of these outside groups.

We had supporters who came up regularly from the Wills Tobacco factory in Dennistoun, Glasgow. We had constant contact with the workers at Yarrows shipyard: when I went up to Yarrows to speak to the people involved, the collection on that day alone came to £1,500. We also visited the docks, infirmaries and fire stations in Glasgow and we were always well-treated. The SOGAT print union also gave financial support on a tremendous scale. And we had donations simply sent to us through the post, by people who had heard or read about the Polmaise miners and their fight from people in the locality, and from as far away as the south of England. In September 1984 we received a donation of 2,000 francs from miners in northern France.

Our secretary and treasurer handled £107,000 during the strike. This was the figure for the strike fund, made up from collections and donations, and did not include our hardship fund.

At Christmas 1984, every miner's child in Fallin received a present provided by SOGAT. Gestures like that meant that, for the kids, Christmas was as good as could be expected under the circumstances.

The local trades council here, in Stirling, played a big part all through the miners' strike. They started holding a meeting every Tuesday night, to which different people were brought to hear the miners' case. On September 22nd 1984 a march through Stirling town centre in support of the striking miners, organised by the Central Federation of Trades Councils, was attended by 4,000 people. [Prominent left Labour MP] Tony Benn spoke at that march; [left Labour MP] Dennis Skinner addressed a similar rally in Grangemouth just before Christmas 1984.

Later on during the strike, a theatre company gave us support, putting on a play in support of the miners in the Stirling miners' welfare.

* * *

The local miners' welfare club at Fallin gave us invaluable assistance – the full use of the premises, which didn't cost us any money whatsoever. Plus the welfare and its committee were really good to us in many other ways. On Mondays to Fridays, there were first-class meals laid on in the club, cooked in the kitchen there – usually tatties and mince, steak pie, followed by a dessert. The miner and his full family were catered for.

The miners' welfare also organised to take all the kids up to the miners' gala day in Edinburgh and gave them a lunch-box with sandwiches, crisps, sweeties etc – all this was free.

The central point for the organisation of the miners' strike in the Fife and Stirlingshire area was Fishcross, where delegates from each village strike committee met on a regular basis. Every now and again we were handed foodstuffs, tinned stuff etc, which I then brought back over here and handed into the kitchen.

The miners in charge of the menu could be quite ingenious. One dinnertime I went into the welfare and somebody said, "Did you get your dinner John?" I hadn't. They said, "You missed the lamb". I said, "Well it's me that brings food across from Fishcross and I don't remember bringing any lamb over." But lamb there was, a meal of which any household would have been proud.

* * *

Right at the very beginning of the strike, the Reverend Downey was here in Fallin, and was

pretty involved in the pit: he was the local padre for the pit. He was in the union box one day, just after the strike began, and a paper came to take a photo of members of the NUM committee. I told the photographer that the minister was there too, so they said they would put him in the same photo, and the minister was all for it. But when he found out it was the *Morning Star* [newspaper linked to the Communist Party], he did a disappearing act! We never saw him in the union box after that, although the local church did give us a church hall for things like kids' dinners etc.

The Reverend Downey has left now and the new minister is a Miss Muir, who was quite active with regard to the pit, and was prepared to go down the pit and show an interest in the miners, and is also very active in the village of Fallin.

* * *

During the strike, miners received payments from the union depending on their circumstances. No-one was getting any less than £5 a week, some much more. In addition to our strike funds we had a special hardship fund, looked after by three committee members; this was money given to us by the regional council to make special payments where necessary. We looked after people who ran into difficulties because of being on strike. We went to court on two or three occasions. When the strike started, all the coal, to which miners and their families are usually entitled, stopped. The local management stopped the coal from coming in. They blamed the Scottish NCB headquarters at Greenpark, and Greenpark blamed them, and for a long time no coal came out of Polmaise at all. They did a lot of awkward things. They said things like, "The coal hasn't been ordered". If people went up for pensioners' coal they just didn't bother. Then the Coal Board agreed that all people with doctors' lines would qualify for coal. Only after a number of months did we get all the problems straightened out.

During the miners' strike we constantly had to assist NUM members who were getting involved with sheriff's officers over HP agreements and other unpaid bills as a result of being on strike. If I dealt with one case like this, I dealt with dozens. I would write to a company telling them that a miner, whom they were after for cash, was on strike and that there was no way he could pay the full money, but would pay something.

Food supplies arrive at Fallin miners' welfare from the print union SOGAT

There was only one company I can remember that wouldn't agree to negotiate some sort of deal: a Falkirk firm which sold cars on hire purchase (HP). One miner, a married man with a family, had a car from them worth £2,500; another single chap was paying up something like £2,000. When the strike started they were midway through the payments. The firm got on to them, threatening to uplift the cars, whereas the hire purchase agreement stated that they could not do so. So we went to Stirling sherriff court, where I represented the two miners. When we got to the court I announced myself to the judge, but he said that having pleaded guilty, the miners could not have me representing them. I said they were not pleading guilty. The miners were able to state their case; court decided that they could pay £2 a week and they did so from then on.

Then, unknown to me, the under-manager with this company approached two men concerned, and this was at a time when the miners were getting hit very hard from all sides, and said that if they signed a form, their cars would be repossessed and put in a compound until the end of the miners' strike, when they would get the cars back. The two lads signed the form without reading it and the firm took the two cars off them. We went back to court but to no avail. The company increased the price of the cars, from £2,000 to £3,500, from £2,500 to £4,000. So the two lads are still paying for those cars and neither of them has a car to show for it. They are paying about £2 a week, which is about £8 a month, compared to £34 a month that was originally the hire purchase agreement. But now the monthly sum has increased because interest charges have increased. It will take them years to pay this off.

The same company tried this on another member of the union, one of our committee members. He offered to pay them £5 a week and they threatened take him to court. We told them to go ahead and go to court, but they didn't. So that man still has a car.

* * *

Three weeks after the national strike began, at the end of March 1984, a father, his son and two other miners sat down the Hem Heath pit in Staffordshire. They were demanding a national ballot and the resignation of Scargill. The Coal Board sent TV cameras and press people down; these men even had their dinner sent down to them. At that time, we were afraid of our pit being sabotaged and flooded, and of the miners being blamed. The Coal Board had already tried to do this to us in December, as they had to the miners at Bogside. Already, in the early weeks of the strike, the management had padlocked the gates of Polmaise, told the press we had been responsible for this and that the padlocks had been put on while there was a "large picket", when in fact there was no picket at all. (And remember, they have now closed the pit, and flooded it, after spending £23 million.)

Anyway, we wanted to check on safety procedures. So at the back of the Staffordshire miners' sit-in, which was against the strike, we did something similar here at Polmaise in favour of the strike. Four striking miners agreed to work James Rennie, Jimmy Graham, Alex McCallum and Jim O'Hare. They went down the pit to do safety work, to ensure the future of the pit, and came to the surface after three days. While in England the police were being called in against striking miners who were stopping scabs going to work, here at Polmaise the police were called in against miners wanting to work on safety.

The four weren't sacked when they came up the pit, but 11 days later. They were some of the first miners in Britain to be sacked for fighting for their jobs – and are still sacked yet. The hypocrisy of it was that every pit in Britain was supposed to be open for work for any miner – but our men, who deliberately went to work to protect the pit, were sent home and then sacked.

There were four other men sacked at this time. Bob Purdie and Robert Curley had been doing safety work, watching the pumps while the sit-in was taking place. They were ordered up the pit and refused to leave the pumps, which would have been illegal. Alex Laird and Frank Weston were also sacked during this management attempt to intimidate the miners.

These men were not even involved in the work-in. They were at the pit because, at the beginning of the national strike, we agreed to give every type of safety cover management wanted. (It should be added that, through time, management realised what we were doing was financing the strike from this work. Those working on safety agreed to pay 20 per cent of their wages into the strike fund; when

management found this out, they cut some of the workers off and had men doing extra work down the pit. So on safety shifts, instead of a man watching one pump, he had to watch one pump in one area and another in another area.)

* * *

To this day I am convinced we were right to guard against Coal Board sabotage not only because of what happened at Bogside, but because of what happened at Polkemmet pit in West Lothian.

In November 1984, an emergency was declared at Polkemmet. There were safety men standing by, but they were stopped from going down by the Coal Board. Management made out that the men wouldn't go down the pit but that was a lot of bunkum. They were stopped.

The firemen working at Polkemmet actually allowed the pumps to be switched off. This was just what had happened here in Fallin when they tried to flood the pit here.

While Polkemmet was flooding, the Scottish area NUM leaders were doing little about it. The Polkemmet NUM delegate, Jim Neilsen, raised this at a delegates' conference. He also asked that Jimmy Young, the NUM agent, get down to the pit to highlight the situation and make sure the safety men were getting to work. But due to the Coal Board's tactics, Jimmy Young was having trouble even getting into the colliery.

By the time the strike ended, a large part of Polkemmet pit was lost because of this flooding. Shortly after the return to work it was closed, and the men either took redundancy or were transferred, mostly to Bilston Glen.

In December 1984 Castlehill pit was flooded too, but not to the extent that it had to be closed. The Coal Board really didn't want to lose Castlehill at that stage. If they had, they would have done the same as they did to Polkemmet and Bogside. They allowed men in to pump the water out.

* * *

During the strike, in November 1984, the Coal Board introduced security men with dogs at Polmaise, and that didn't go down well with the miners. It was a village pit, and people walked in and out of the gates as they pleased: the gates were never locked. Then all of a sudden you saw these people there with dogs and you weren't allowed in the gate. They made the place look like a fortress. They put these security guards there one Saturday night, when the miners were all in the club. Somebody going home noticed these guards and went back into the club and told the miners, who went over and were arguing like hell with the security men. It ended up with quite a number of men being arrested by the police. I myself had gone home from the club that night; I got phoned at about two in the morning, and I had to go to the pit and try to get things quietened down.

It was quite understandable that the miners vented their feelings about these people being there guarding the gates, for which there was no need whatsoever. After all, there were no blacklegs at Polmaise, there was no need for picketing or crowds at the gates. Furthermore we were inside the gates every day, because our union office was inside the pit gate, on NCB property. The NCB was deliberately creating problems, involving the police at all times.

That weekend there were police in the village, because they had heard rumours that there was going to be trouble with these security guards. But after a couple of days it died down because the miners realised they just had to accept the situation.

7. Up against the state

We found out that the police were involved in the miners' strike right at the start, when we sent a car-load of pickets down to Ashington pit in Northumberland. James Armitage, the Polmaise branch secretary, was driving. The pickets got to the English border, and were stopped by police and turned back home again. As the strike went on, Maggie Thatcher and her government made up their minds that the miners were not going to win – so they started using the heavy artillery. First it was the police, then the courts.

In September 1984, our minutes secretary

recorded his thoughts about this: "I heard a news report that the Home Secretary, Leon Brittan, told the judiciary that they were not being savage enough with miners who had been charged with various offences. He stated that for mobbing and rioting some should receive life sentences. This man was trying to undermine the judiciary." The minutes also noted that, even before Brittan's statement, miners were receiving far greater fines and sentences than others convicted on similar charges.

Whether you were right or whether you were wrong, if the police approached you and you were a miner, you were wrong. They wouldn't speak to you properly or discuss anything with you. You couldn't explain anything. They had their minds made up.

On March 25th 1984 a bus-load of football supporters were going from Fallin to the Scottish League Cup final which was played that day. There they were with their scarves and flags when they were stopped by the police. One or two were recognised as miners, and the police kept the bus waiting, on the grounds that they were checking for pickets.

You made your complaints about this kind of thing but it didn't make any difference: nobody was interested.

Polmaise, like every other pit, had our share of arrests on pickets. Alex McCallum was lifted, and fined £200 for breach of the peace, for simply standing on a picket line – at Longannet over in Fife, where a scab, Pearson, who lived in Culross, was going into work.

I went to court with Alex, and, when the judge came in, I didn't stand up because I was having trouble with the cartilage in my leg at that time; I was drawn aside and I was warned that I could get fined for contempt of court. The witnesses for the police were a constable and an inspector, with two conflicting stories. McCallum's lawyer said she thought the case should be thrown out; the judge said that although the stories were conflicting, he believed the inspector. The fact was that, on picket lines such as these, the police had to lift their quota of men. If it was peaceful they would lift people anyway.

The police in Central region were not the worst we came across. I was asked by the regional council once for any complaints we had about them and there were none. The Fife police, and the Lothians police in particular, were a different story. There was no understanding from them. They would lift you as soon as look at you. Facing them on picket lines turned you against the police as a whole.

* * *

The biggest battles with the police in Scotland came at the pickets of the Ravenscraig steelworks and the Hunterston terminal in Ayrshire where foreign coal stocks for Ravenscraig were landed.

I'll give the Scottish NUM their due. They were not pleased with the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) at Ravenscraig and the plant convenor, Tommy Brennan. From early on in the strike they sought co-operation from the ISTC, and assurances that scab coal stocks would not be used to keep the plant running while the miners were on strike. But Brennan was saying that he "wouldn't be hanging himself on somebody else's cross". No way was he, or Clive Lewis the ISTC regional officer, going to get their men involved in the struggle.

In agreement with the NUM, the rail unions limited Ravenscraig to one train-load of coal per day. Then, on Monday April 23rd 1984, a Norwegian ship arrived at Hunterston with coal bound for Ravenscraig, the first such shipment since the national strike began. The dockers wouldn't unload it – and made it quite clear there would be a national dock strike if anyone tried to force them to. But coal was unloaded by ISTC members, who worked the cranes at the Hunterston terminal, and loaded onto lorries.

On Thursday May 3rd, 15 lorries ran into Ravenscraig loaded with coal and this was the start of picketing there. These lorries were driven by members of the Transport and General Workers Union – a point we will come back to. Many miners thought that the answer to this was to stop Ravenscraig completely, but that idea just seemed to be pushed to one side.

The next target for the pickets was Hunterston, where the coal was being landed from foreign ships. It turned out to be a miniature Orgreave. [The Orgreave coking works in Yorkshire were the scene of a large scale battle between miners and the police. See below.]

On Tuesday May 8th about 1,500 pickets there faced 1,000-plus police. The miners

lined up and the police horses simply went right into them. I was surprised no-one was actually killed. My brother James was among the 65 miners lifted at Hunterston. He was flung into jail and kept there for ten hours, and ended up being fined £150 for breach of the peace. His "crime" was that he was standing there, when the horses charged, and was knocked down. It was the police who picked him up off the ground and that was that. Another Polmaise man, an engineer, Geordie Richardson, was also arrested.

It was rumoured in the press that we would go back to picket Hunterston the following day, Wednesday May 9th. There were people sitting up on the banking: they had come out in their cars, with picnics, to see if there would be a further confrontation between the miners and the police.

On the day after that, Thursday May 10th, we were all arrested trying to get to Hunterston, in the biggest mass round-up in the miners' strike.

We were going through Stepps, in Glasgow, with six bus-loads of men – nearly 300 of us all together. A single police car came along, with an inspector in it, a man who was just ready for retirement. He stopped the first bus and asked where we were going. I was in charge of that bus, and I said, "We're going to Largs for the day, for a picnic." And we actually had hampers of food and cartons of lemonade in the back of the bus. But of course he didn't take any notice. He told the driver to turn the bus round.

We all got out and sat on the road. Police reinforcements were called, and they shoved us all back on the buses – dragged men by the hair, by the ears, and let their knees bump along the ground.

They took us all to different police stations around Glasgow, took our names, and charged a total of 292 of us under Sections 17 and 41 of the Police Act for failing to comply with a request to go home. They put us all in the wrong buses for getting home: they put men from Stirlingshire on the Fife buses, men from Fife on the Stirlingshire bus, etc.

These sorts of tactics provoked an uproar. Even the coach companies protested, because their drivers – who had never left their vehicles – were lifted along with the rest of us. A special shop stewards' meeting was called by the Scottish TUC to protest at this particular mass arrest. At this time a march was organised, from Fife to Glasgow, to win support for the miners. It was organised by some of the strike committees in Fife, and a delegation from Polmaise joined with the banner. It was supposed to stop at the Ravenscraig steelworks for a demonstration, but the NUM Scottish executive sent a representative to speak to the marchers at Coatbridge, and had it stopped.

I couldn't understand this at the time, because it was a demonstration on behalf of the miners – in fact most of them were miners.

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The issue of the Ravenscraig coal would not go away. On Thursday June 21st 1984, there was a meeting between Scargill and leaders of the road, rail and sea unions. He wanted their solidarity to put a stop to steel production. The ISTC were not interested, and the following week talks between the NUM and ISTC broke up with no agreement reached. The scab lorries continued to roll into Ravenscraig.

In July the first national dock strike in 12 years took place, against the ISTC's attempts to unload scab coal at Scunthorpe. It went on for three weeks.

In September, ISTC members tried to unload 87,000 tonnes of coal from a ship at Hunterston, and another national dock strike began. But a meeting was held between the Clyde Port Authority, British Steel Corporation, the steel unions and the STUC, to work out a way of calling it off.

By this time the Scottish area NUM was allowing 18,000 tonnes of coal a week into Ravenscraig; no further mass pickets were held at the plant, and it ran at full production until the end of the strike.

I don't blame the ordinary workers at Ravenscraig. They had cut down production, and the miners' union had agreed to this. So at the back of their minds, the workers there probably thought they were helping the miners in some way – which was all wrong. They should have been more thoroughly involved – all the more so, because some of their coal was coming from Polkemmet pit that was being flooded at the time. Although the men at the top of the tree in the ISTC knew what was happening, I think the .

majority of those working in the plant thought that everything was above-board, that somehow both the NUM and the British Steel Corporation were quite happy.

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Face to face at Orgreave, June 18th 1984: the police

Face to face at Orgreave, June 18th 1984: Scots and Yorkshire miners... again, Norrie Lean is in the hat!

In May 1984 the biggest mass picket of the strike was building up at Orgreave coking plant in south Yorkshire. The Yorkshire miners were trying to stop coal lorries going in and fought some big battles with the police.

On June 19th 1984, the second "battle of Orgreave" took place, this time with contingents from Scotland, Wales and elsewhere in attendance. Straight away when they arrived, our men were rattled by the police attitude. They soon realised that the police were all organised to deal with the miners. At the height of the battle, police horses chased them through General Stores, through housing schemes and across people's gardens, everywhere. Some miners came back to Fallin, men who had been working in the pit more than 40 years, and said they had never experienced anything like it in their lives. These were men who had been in many a strike, but Orgreave was the worst of the lot. The English police were extremely hostile to any miners who were down there demonstrating for whatever reason, including in Sheffield where our national union headquarters was.

If there were five or six of you walking along the pavement and you were miners, you were in trouble. You would get driven out of town. When men from Polmaise lobbied the

NUM executive in Sheffield on April 19th 1984, for example, three of them – Charlie Simpson, Jim O'Hare and John Rennie – were arrested just for sitting on a wall. Charlie was charged with assaulting a police officer, and all three with being "drunk and disorderly". They strongly denied these charges, which, after several costly trips to appear in court, were dropped. "The police would appear to be acting as the strong right arm of this fascist Tory government", our minutes secretary noted, when this incident was reported to our strike committee.

One of the hardest experiences the Polmaise pickets went through was at Wivenhoe docks, near Colchester. Our pickets arrived down there late one night, and although the local miners' support group were there to meet them, there was no accommodation fixed. They were about to turn around and come back to Scotland. But one of the activists went away and came back with five school-teachers from Brightlingsea, which is nearby, and they were prepared to put the pickets up for the night! They were very hospitable and I believe some of the lads are still in touch with them to this day.

In the morning the miners went down to the docks to try and stop the coal lorries. The port was right next to the train station, and pickets gathered in the road leading to the station. Thousands of police poured out of the station and blocked the road. They were as aggressive as ever, and they were all wearing these cover-all waterproofs, which meant that none of their identification numbers were visible. Our men were outnumbered, and decided to get in their cars and block the road with them.

The Polmaise picket van, which was part of the convoy of pickets' cars, stalled. A number of police jumped into it: that was how they split the pickets' convoy. A police pick-up truck arrived with a block and tackle, and lifted the Polmaise van up, with the pickets still inside it. Some of our men insist that that truck was driven by a soldier.

* * *

On Friday June 15th 1984, a picket named Joe Green was killed outside Kellingley power station, and we sent a full bus-load from Polmaise to his funeral. Before that, another miner, David Gareth Jones, had been killed on the picket line in Nottinghamshire. When people get killed on picket lines it makes you wonder, it makes you think more carefully. Maggie Thatcher was out to beat the miners, to win that strike whatever it cost.

On Thursday July 19th 1984, Thatcher spoke at the Scottish Tory party conference and compared the miners to the Argentinians. She described us as the "enemy within" – all because we were part of a trade union. This was diabolical.

It's your right to be part of a union if you want to be; it's not a crime, you're in it to make sure you get a fair crack of the whip. We have seen in the past, in my father's days, the conditions they had when they had no unions – and the conditions in the pit were 100 per cent better after the war as a result of the unions.

It's obvious that Mrs Thatcher took the NUM on first because she was scared of us. But it must also be said that the Tories were better prepared than we were. They were geared up. We never actually thought she would use the sort of tactics she did: the police, the judges, anyone at all that the government had power over.

When our pickets came back from England and said they were sure they had seen soldiers on the picket lines, I don't know whether this was right or not. But looking back now, it wouldn't surprise me if Maggie Thatcher had gone to those lengths.

* * *

During the miners' strike we didn't really think in terms of other people coming out on strike with us. We thought we could win, by involving every union inside the pit gates, in particular NACODS. Although they are a managerial union, all their members were miners at one time, because only miners with five years' experience can apply for jobs in the NACODS grades. If NACODS had come out, then all the unions within the pit would have been out bar BACM – whom we didn't expect out anyway, because they are management and have always kept themselves aloof from the workers.

If NACODS had come out, nobody would have been able to get down the pit at all. The danger of flooding would have escalated; the stakes would have been raised all round. Perhaps all this would have had a knock-on effect: perhaps other workers, other unions,

would maybe have come out and dropped tools to back the miners. But the fact that we still had people working within the pits was always a blockage.

Remember that in September 1984, NACODS won a 79 per cent vote for strike action, over the issues of the colliery review procedure, and of their members' right to get paid when turned away from work by a miners' picket line. They could well have called their members out then – and I feel sure that things would have been different. After the strike, NACODS got a number of benefits – 100 per cent bonuses, extra payments and all the rest of it. These are deals that we believe were made during the miners' strike.

* * *

At Polmaise branch, we always believed that the union should get right into the TUC, asking them for support. They were hanging back – I don't know why, but I think it was because they were afraid of getting a refusal.

From the start, we knew we could not rely on the TUC. The TUC leaders, and the Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock too, were going out of their way to condemn what they called the miners' picket line violence. But from all I know, I would say the majority of violence on the picket lines was caused by the police.

They would use a situation simply to lift people: we would be standing on a picket line and the police lines would suddenly open, and they would drag nine or ten miners through and charge them with breach of the peace. Kinnock – especially coming from a mining family in Wales, and having been brought up among miners – should have come out and sided with the miners. But he never did.

In September 1984, we lobbied the TUC at Brighton, demanding full backing for the strike. There were about 5,000 on the lobby. I was part of a delegation of 25 Polmaise miners that went down – actually we went as guests of Channel 4, who were making a programme on the miners' strike. They sat us in a room in one of the big hotels, and we watched the full Congress proceedings on close-circuit TV.

Down in Brighton, we had a conversation with Bill Sirs, leader of the ISTC, and asked him why his members wouldn't give 100 per cent backing to the miners. He said the same sort of thing as the TUC itself was saying: about legal difficulties and all sorts of other things, to excuse his position. He wouldn't come out and say to our faces that he wasn't supporting the miners.

We didn't go to the TUC expecting other workers to come out on strike. We were looking for them not to cross picket lines, we wanted them to black the movement of fuel and we wanted them to refuse to handle fuel which had been transported by scabs. This was all in the resolution moved by Scargill – and it was passed. But the TUC added a statement to it, that the General Council would be in charge of organising this solidarity – which was like somebody taking the reins of the horse.

I felt at the time that the TUC was just another talking-shop, like the Scottish TUC and Labour Party conferences we attended. And so it turned out. The General Council never did anything constructive. Their involvement in our strike – when it came – was merely a question of people paying lip service, of people appearing on platforms making flamboyant speeches. But people continued to cross our picket lines right through the strike. The Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), for example, had members going through picket lines on a regular basis.

The Yuill and Dodds lorries going into Ravenscraig were driven by TGWU members. Although people said that these drivers were going against union policy, they remained union members, and nothing was done as a result of them crossing picket lines. They were holding back from expelling these drivers from the TGWU, using the anti-union laws as an excuse.

At one point, Hugh Wyper, Scottish district secretary of the TGWU, came to an open meeting in the Tullibody miners' welfare, at which he was one of the main speakers. He was standing up telling us that the TGWU members would be dealt with, but we knew it was all bluff. He was asked some very angry questions by some of the miners' wives, who felt that much stronger action should be taken against scabs. At the end, some local activists who were members of the TGWU were arguing heatedly with Wyper on the same point.

These scab drivers were being fined £20; as far as we were concerned, if they had been

scabbing they should be flung out of the union altogether.

We can see now that if the TGWU, and the railwaymen, had stood firm, coal could not have been moved, and we couldn't have been beaten. Although we never seriously considered the idea of people coming out on strike with us, we did want them not to cross picket lines – and of course if they had done that, from the beginning, the miners would have begun to achieve something; the factories and big power stations could not have got coal in; we could have won the strike. But these TGWU members, with the knowledge of Wyper and company, were blacklegging day in and day out.

We didn't realise at the beginning of the strike the significance of Wyper's membership of the Communist Party or the way that members of that party worked to defuse such issues. Most of the miners at Polmaise, particularly the young ones, didn't know or care what the CP was. I know now what I didn't know then – that many decisions relating to the NUM Scottish area, and presumably other unions too, were actually being discussed at CP meetings and then CP members arrived at union meetings with their minds already made up.

* * *

Here in Fallin, before the strike, the vast majority of miners were not attached to any political organisation. Although they all voted Labour, I think you could count on one hand the number in the pit who were in the Labour Party or even thought of themselves as political.

Unlike Fife, where the Communist Party was very strong from the 1920s onward, there was no CP organisation in the villages on this side of the river. There were a few individual members, but no branches as such. The CP didn't interest our fathers, it didn't interest us; we were miners in village pits – Plean, Cowie, Bannockburn, Fallin – and we felt we didn't need to be in the CP.

The miners here were quite happy, having a job to go to, working their five shifts and getting on with their lives; they didn't give a lot of thought to political matters. As far as the miners' strike being a political issue went at the start, a lot of them didn't really know what that meant.

It was Maggie Thatcher who made sure that we became aware it was a political situation. When she spoke against the miners, she spoke for the Tory government – and that's obviously politics. Anyone involved in the miners' strike, or looking from outside, could have seen that. As the strike went on, we realised it wasn't just a case of arguing for better conditions within the pits, or against pit closures, or things like that, we realised it was a political situation.

Before the miners' strike I myself was non-political, although I had always voted Labour. But during the strike not just myself but about 20 or 30 miners in Fallin joined the Labour Party. At the time, we didn't know anything about the Labour Party, about the constitution or anything like that, but wanted to join as a result of what happened during the strike.

About the time that the strike ended in March 1985, a Labour Party Scottish conference was taking place and there was a little incident over this which sickened some miners.

We decided to go to the conference, but we couldn't get a ticket. So we sent up to Eric Clarke, [general secretary of the Scottish area NUM], thinking that as a leading member of the Labour Party he could help us out – but he couldn't get any tickets. He put us onto Ella Egan who was McGahey's secretary, and a member of the *Communist* Party, to get tickets for the *Labour* Party conference! She got hold of some visitors' tickets from some people in Aberdeen. This was something the miners could not understand.

David Hamilton, who was a sacked miner, spoke at that conference on a resolution about Chile. We agreed with the resolution on Chile, but we felt he should have been speaking about sacked miners at that time. There were resolutions on the agenda about the sacked miners, but they were like all the resolutions: a lot of talk but nothing was actually being done.

8. A bitter return to work

What we were on strike for was straightforward. We wanted a new procedure laid down for pit closures. We were not saying that, if a pit had major geological faulting, or no coal, it should stay open we were saying that pits should close on these grounds but no others. Scargill and the miners wanted a deal thrashed out which would take these things into account.

The Coal Board had the first say, the middle say, and the last say – and we wanted that changed. This had been put forward, before the strike, in resolutions from branches.

Supposing, after six months, Scargill had decided to go back to work. The miners would have been saying that Scargill had let them down. But he wouldn't budge an inch on the pit closure issue. If I had been in his place I would have done the very same.

If it had been Frank Chapple [general secretary of the electricians' union 1966-82 and figurehead for right wing trade unionism] in the same position, the minute he got something, some small concession, he would have come back to the membership and held a ballot, hoping that the membership would tell him to return to work.

That's the difference: Scargill was man enough to say, "No, it's my job, I'll lead a fight for union policies." It would have been quite easy for Scargill to run back to the membership and say, "They've offered us this; I don't think it's enough, but we're going to ballot you on it." That was the difference with Scargill, he didn't do that. And I think he was absolutely right.

The first round of talks between the NUM and the NCB were held in April 1984, just after the strike began. Then there were eleven more sets of talks throughout the strike. Each one of them broke down. There were times when a deal seemed to be all sewed up, and then you had MacGregor, in the middle of the talks, going to the phone, and the Energy Minister, Peter Walker, telling him: "Don't accept the deal."

We weren't getting anywhere, and through time the miners were getting into a state where they couldn't stay out any longer, and started going back to their work. Men were getting desperate – which was understandable. Particularly alarming was the number of miners that had been sacked by this time. The government and the Coal Board saw the situation, and put on more pressure.

The longer the strike went on, the clearer it became that the government was taking the miners on. Anybody else going for an increase in wages at that time – and this applied particularly to the railwaymen – found there were no stumbling blocks, and that their increase was granted.

The reason was quite simple: Thatcher did not want to fight the miners on one front, fight somebody else on another front, and perhaps on a third front too. That was why she stepped in and gave the railwaymen the money they were looking for – so she could keep wearing down the miners.

* * *

After their Congress in September 1984, the TUC, who were doing little to give us practical support, stepped up their efforts to get the NUM to talk to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).

On Friday February 15th 1985, the TUC General Council met the NUM executive and put a document from the Coal Board in front of them. It simply put the same position the Coal Board had put at the beginning of the dispute. The other side did not shift at all, and more and more miners were drifting back to work.

On Sunday March 3rd 1985, a Special Delegate Conference of the NUM was called to discuss ending the strike. One of the reasons why we were so fiercely opposed to this was because of the desperate situation of the sacked men.

The conference voted by 98 to 91 in favour of a resolution from South Wales which called for a return to work on Tuesday March 5th "without any signed agreement", and called on the NEC to negotiate "an amnesty for those men dismissed during this dispute".

The resolution was a disgrace. The reasons given for calling off the strike were: "(a) a drift back of members to work in all areas, and (b) that it has now become clear that the Coal Board have no intentions whatsoever to have any discussions with the union unless they sign the document presented by the TUC to the union on Sunday February 17th."

The Scottish area was for "an organised return-to-work, but only after the NCB has agreed an amnesty for the sacked men", but this resolution was voted down in favour of the Welsh one. Kent and Yorkshire had resolutions that the strike should continue, and these were also defeated.

By the end of the strike, 205 Scottish miners had been victimised and it was clear that no guarantees were being given by the Coal Board to reinstate them. When the decision to return to work was announced, some men from the Lothians – where the sackings had taken the heaviest toll were sitting on the steps outside the meeting, crying.

Arthur Scargill said that the other trades unions, with a few exceptions, had "to their eternal shame" left the miners to fight on their own.

We were due to have a Polmaise branch meeting that Sunday, to decide to go back to work. I was at Perth at the Scottish Labour Party conference, and I made it my point not to go back to Fallin, and to tell the branch officials they couldn't hold the meeting without the delegate. A big part of the reason for this was to do with the sacked miners: we didn't want to return to work while their cases were unresolved.

On the Monday, March 4th, the Scottish area delegates met, at the SOGAT print union club in Edinburgh, and decided by eight votes to seven to stay out, and demand an amnesty for the sacked men; SCEBTA voted by ten to four to go back to work. But by the Wednesday, it had become clear that most miners were returning to work, and the majority of Scottish pits changed their mind. A further meeting was held, and only five pits (of which Polmaise was one) voted to continue the strike.

We stayed out, and held a further branch meeting the following weekend. During the meeting, the sacked men went out and met on their own; they came back in and told us they wanted us to go back to work.

The decision to return was finally taken by the Polmaise strike committee on Monday March 11th. The branch minutes record our chairman, George Goodwillie, saying: "We had fought a good fight that will go down as one of the hardest struggles in history. We had been badly let down by the TUC. But many felt that our biggest let-down were the so-called miners of Nottingham who scabbed throughout." The committee noted, with pride, that no-one had scabbed at Polmaise, not even for a single day.

We returned to work on Tuesday March 12th 1985, a week after the rest of the Scottish pits. We had been out for 56 weeks. I know there were some pits which marched back with bands and banners, but we didn't. We didn't think, after having been out for a full year, and considering the hardships we had gone through and which the sacked men were still going through, that it was a time for celebrating, singing or parading. Even if we had won the strike straight out I don't suppose we would have gone back with bands and banners anyway; it had been a hard fight. We knew we were going back to work to get booted around – and that's definitely what happened.

It's all right saying, "We're going back to work with dignity". But we didn't go back with dignity: we went back with drooped heads. We were sick.

There were boys at the top of the tree in the union – I can't say this of any miner – but those at the top, who were glad to see us get back to work. They could then go back to their smooth way of living.

* * *

After we went back, the management continued to hold up development work, as they had done after the lock-out in the summer of 1983. For six months after the end of the strike, from March to October 1985, no work was done in the pit.

The management let it be known in no uncertain manner that they were running the show. The manager said, "There is no union, I am the union." Even then, we tried to work with them; we told them we wanted to work and make the pit a viable unit. But they wouldn't wear it. They were shoving the boot

in, even worse than during the strike. The union lost all faith in the management, not only at area level but at local level too.

They carried on sticking the boot into me as the delegate. They kept threatening to sack me. For the six months from March to October 1985, my wages were an average of £27 a week. I was working five days, never losing a shift, but when I went down the pit late, or came up early, to do union work, they cut my time. The delegate's right to do union work was just wiped out. You could say I was on less than a quarter of my wages.

Then they came with a further £20 million investment plan for Polmaise. The proviso was that so many men had to leave the pit. They called this "voluntary redundancy" but there was nothing voluntary about it.

The same had happened at Kinneil and Cardowan of course; there were, men there who never got a job after the shutdowns. At Polmaise, we had electricians, engineers and other tradesmen – some of them were offered on-cost mining jobs at other pits. But there were no tradesmen's jobs going. Previously this had never been allowed: if you were a tradesman you were a tradesman; if you were a miner you were a miner. Now the demarcation was gone.

The management claimed there were jobs at Castlehill and Solsgirth pits. But the reality was: at that time we had 260 men at Polmaise, and if we had decided to transfer *en masse* to Castlehill or Solsgirth, then 260 men across there would have had to go, starting with the older men and working downwards.

The whole procedure was organised to cover up the fact that, in effect, there were compulsory redundancies. Personally I would call all the redundancies in the Scottish coal field since 1983 compulsory, because in reality there were no jobs to which those miners could have gone.

When they came with this new £20 million, we came round to accepting the fact that people would have to leave the pit. We had a number of branch meetings, and drew up lists of who would take voluntary redundancy. But management wouldn't accept the list we gave them: they wanted to pick them; they wanted to keep men in who were 54, 55 years old, and force others out who were in their 30s.

In my own case, I was to stay in the pit, because I was the delegate – and I was happy to do so – but management wouldn't accept the fact that my name wasn't on the list. I was made redundant, bunged out, and they didn't give me the opportunity to transfer across to the other side of the Forth. And this didn't just happen to me, it happened to other members of the branch committee; in fact it happened up and down the Scottish coalfield. After that my only connection with the pit was the work I continued on behalf of the sacked miners.

* * *

After the national strike, there were disagreements within the NUM about the reasons for its failure, and the tactics adopted.

Bolton and Co., for example, said that the strike had proved the ineffectiveness of mass picketing. I don't agree. The mass pickets staged by the miners were shows of strength; like any other demonstration, by turning out large numbers of men the mass pickets made people wonder what sort of case the miners had.

Another question was about ballots. This argument goes back to the time of Joe Gormley [national president of the NUM 1971-82], when there was a ballot to approve the incentive scheme. Gormley got beaten on this because nobody wanted the scheme, so he allowed people down in South Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire to use rule 37, where a branch can go on its own against union policy – in this case, to accept the incentive scheme.

We used the same rule, in 1984, to go on strike, when the majority of the union had not yet taken that course of action. In 1984 people from Nottingham, Leicester and other places argued for a ballot – although whether we had had a ballot or not, and whether we won it or not, they would still have been at work during the strike.

I thought then, and think now, that their argument for a ballot was just a whitewash. But after the strike, Bolton and Co. began to say that it had been a mistake not to hold a ballot at the start. They never said this at the time, and I think that by raising the issue at the end of the strike they were simply trying to clear themselves of blame – "It wasn't me,

it was someone else; if it had been left to me I would have held a ballot."

The positive contribution of some of the Scottish NUM leadership to the strike was minimal. Most of the miners found them out during the strike. Perhaps if there had been a victory, and the pits were working normally with the full workforce that had experienced the strike, some of the Scottish officials and EC members would actually have been booted out of their positions.

What seemed to come across from them all the time was that no fight against Thatcher was possible, that we would all simply have to sit and wait for the next Labour government before anything could be done. With regard to the sacked miners, they said this quite clearly: we will have to wait for a Labour government to come in before the miners can get their jobs back. That's what they were saying right up until the 1987 election; now Thatcher is back in again, and they have no more stories to tell the sacked men, they have just abandoned them.

A further disagreement in the NUM came over the issue of the miners in the breakaway union. I believe they are getting used by Thatcher – although, the minute they stop falling into line, the same will happen to them as happened to us. Whether you are a breakaway union or an ordinary union, the Tories will treat you the same way: whatever they say, you have to carry it out and that's that. Anyway, the disagreement in the NUM was about whether or not talks should be held with the aim of re-uniting with the UDM.

Bolton's argument was that to go back to full strength, we would have to unite with the UDM. But this was only his opinion; it was never agreed by a Scottish delegate conference or by branch meetings. The Scottish miners didn't want unity with the UDM, and to this day they don't want it – because having said that they were used by Thatcher, the fact is that they were the people who planted the seed for the defeat of the strike.

A similar dispute came up over six-day working. The Coal Board said that if this wasn't introduced at Margam, in Wales, then they wouldn't sink the pit there. Scargill was down there speaking to the miners and his line was that there was no way this could be accepted. But Bolton has come out and said he is in favour of six-day working, provided it means pits will be opened and jobs provided.

This was the position he took over the Frances pit in Fife, where the Coal Board stated that the pit could be re-opened – but only if six-day working was adopted. We just can't retreat on these things all the time. There will have to be a fight. And I am sure that six-day working will never be the norm as far as Scargill is concerned – but we don't know about Bolton and Co.

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The most diabolical thing about Bolton and Co. was the way that they came out and tried to degrade Scargill after the strike. If they had had anything to say, they should have said it at the time, during the strike, and not waited until afterwards.

Their campaign against Scargill reached its height in the 1987 election for national president, a contest between Scargill and the right-winger John Walsh, from north Yorkshire.

The Scottish area executive, on a proposal from Bolton, made a recommendation to the miners about how to vote, which was "no recommendation". This meant in effect, "don't vote for Scargill". It's the first time in 40-odd years that I can remember the Scottish area saying "no recommendation"; normally the delegates' conference would meet, and a vote would be taken to point to a candidate and say, "this is the man for the job". This time, the delegates' conference was not consulted; the executive took the decision themselves, which was unconstitutional. The truth was that they didn't want Scargill to get back in as president. But they didn't have the guts to come out and say – "We don't want him".

During this election campaign, Scargill was up speaking in the Dalkeith miners' welfare. He addressed this meeting as the national president who had led the miners' strike, without a single official of the Scottish NUM present. It was a disgrace. Only young Michael McGahey junior, McGahey's son, who was a sacked miner and part of the committee fighting for Scargill to be elected, was there.

We went over to this meeting, and during the discussion period a sacked miner from Castlehill raised the matter of Tammy Coulter's behaviour at a Castlehill NUM branch meeting at Tullibody. Coulter was trying to get the branch to adopt the "no recommendation" position.

He had counted the votes of men who weren't there, in his own favour; he had also allowed redundant miners to vote, which was against NUM rules. But the sacked miners, including some from Fallin – who were supporting Scargill – were not allowed to vote. The votes of the redundant men tipped the scales of the Castlehill branch decision.

So the Scottish area leadership were admitting that the sacked miners were still NUM members, but when it came to this – a national issue of great importance – they were not allowed a vote. (The only point to add is that, in spite of the executive, the Scottish miners – those at Castlehill included – voted by a large majority for Scargill and helped him defeat Walsh.)

Arthur Scargill in Blackpool for the Labour Party conference, October 1984

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The "dirty tricks" used against Scargill by Bolton and Co. came as no great surprise to me. I had already seen them use similar methods against others whom they considered to be their political enemies, during the miners' strike.

They believed that they had a full-time job trying to stop people like the Workers Revolutionary Party "infiltrating" the NUM. Many was the time that I got my fingers rapped for speaking on platforms organised by the Workers Revolutionary Party. After one conference in particular, in Edinburgh, McGahey drew me aside and rapped my knuckles for being on a platform with the WRP in Glasgow. I told him in no uncertain manner that I had gone because I thought it would benefit the miners, and that we from Polmaise would be prepared to go and talk to the shepherds on top of the local hills if it would benefit the miners.

Bolton also told me that I shouldn't be

associating so closely with Rowland Sheret, the secretary of the local trades council, because he was "too far to the left". According to Bolton such association wasn't good for the miners' strike.

This went so far that, during the Labour Party Scottish conference in Perth shortly after the miners' strike, the trades council arranged for the sacked miners to meet with Tony Benn, and Bolton and Co. wouldn't attend, simply because it hadn't been arranged by themselves.

All this from someone whom I had previously believed was as far to the "left" as could be – but who turned out to be worse than right-wingers.

I couldn't see what their crib was about any organisation that was arguing for the miners' case. Of course the miners knew it was a miners' strike, and that any major decisions had to be made by them themselves – and for anyone in the NUM to think that the strike could be taken over by outside organisations was nonsense. That never entered anybody's head, not even the people in the "outside" organisations.

This mania against "outside" organisations – from whom we should have been trying to get as much co-operation as possible – really went over the top at the miners' gala day in Edinburgh in June 1984.

Whereas participation in the miners' gala in Yorkshire has, historically, been limited to the miners' branch banners, the Scottish miners' gala has always been one at which all organisations of the working-class movement, indeed anyone supporting the miners, has been welcome. But in 1984, just when we needed all the support we could get, the Scottish NUM officials tried to change this policy.

At a meeting of the Scottish NUM executive on Monday June 4th 1984, just before the gala, McGahey referred to the need for stewards to "prevent any disruptive elements taking part in the march". "Posters depicting the miners' demands and not those of alien forces should be displayed," he said.

At the Gala Day committee meeting on Friday June 9th, this point was reiterated: "Steps would require to be taken to guard against the participation of alien and disruptive forces", the minutes said. This included not only organisations like the WRP, but people like students and others who had come to support the miners. But in the event, these people took part in the gala anyway, and it was a highly successful demonstration.

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As a result of the miners' strike, people know that as long as the Tory government is in, they can go on strike for as long as they like, but they are not going to win. This government was prepared to use any means, any means at all, to beat the miners. I have already stated how they flooded and sabotaged pits. It wouldn't surprise me if, in a future miners' strike, they passed legislation forbidding people to go down the pits once the strike began, whether there were firemen there or not.

It doesn't matter what you do, and how apparently straightforward your case, they have the full weight of the country's judges and police against you. Thatcher won't give an inch. And if you do go on strike – and this can be seen with the nurses, with the teachers, the railwaymen – these people will be out to hammer you into the ground. And their main object is to do away with unions. That's why they were so bitter against the NUM, because they knew if they could beat the NUM, they could take anyone on.

They have taken all the power away from the unions. At one time, if you made an agreement with the bosses, it was down in black and white, it was signed for – and it was adhered to. Not now. This government has done away with all that. And as long as the Tories are in, it will be a case of hanging on to what we have – because we won't be able to gain any ground.

We will only gain if the Labour Party gets in, and that's got to be one of the main subjects on the agenda. There's no way the Labour Party will be able to avoid giving some leeway to the trade unions. They will have to look at the anti-union laws. At the present time we have nothing in terms of rights; she's taken it all away from us, and we'll not get anything while she's in power.

It's not just trades unionists. Look at the position the Tories have put old aged pensioners in. When they came to power they were telling everybody they should get an occupational pension. Now they are telling people who are 75 years of age that if they have a small occupational pension, they won't qualify for the additional pension they are proposing to pay. And some of the former miners, who I can speak about because I

know about, are in this situation: they have an occupational pension of £10 or £13 a week, compared to perhaps £30 for someone who is retiring now. If the Tories are still in power ten years from now, we will have a situation where if you have an occupational pension you will not qualify for a state pension at all.

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Thinking over the lessons of the miners' strike, I believe that if the people involved in unions in the pits, including NACODS, had stood shoulder-to-shoulder, Thatcher would not have won. Perhaps if we had had the right backing, she wouldn't even be here now.

If you go right back in history, it was the miners who more than any other workers stood shoulder-to-shoulder with one another. And now people may give the excuse – we can't win now, they've beaten the miners and so they'll beat us. And that will be the theme all the way down until Maggie Thatcher does get her come-uppance.

The miners' strike was undermined by the leaders of other unions, and the TUC in particular. Neither the Labour Party nor the TUC did anything for the miners but talk, and the TUC's weakness encouraged Maggie Thatcher's attacks on all the unions. Now the Tories are bulldozing union after union, knowing that weakness of leadership – shown by the TUC during the miners' strike – allows them to go from A to Z right through all the unions, with no serious opposition from that direction.

The TUC has made itself powerless because it refuses to stand firm. Look at [Eric] Hammond, [right-wing leader of the electricians' union 1984-92], who is no longer part of the TUC and wants to start up a new union federation of his own. Although I don't agree with him – he's an apology for a trade unionist – the fact is that the TUC never took any action against him. If you stand up and fight, within the TUC, you are going to have to do it yourself – the leadership will condemn you. It's the same in the Labour Party: anyone who challenges Neil Kinnock and his middle-of-the-road policies is condemned for being too far to the left.

I am not saying Thatcher cannot be beaten. She can. Any trade union whose membership is really prepared to go the full way could stand up to her. The power workers, for example, could bring the country to a halt – and there's no way she could keep them out on strike for a year, because electricity is a commodity that's needed on a daily basis. But whether they will or not, I don't know.

You hear people saying, trade unionism is not what it used to be. But this is because the Tories have used the full force of the law to try and demoralise anyone who is in a union. This will only go so far – and then we will turn around and start to go forward.

Of course much depends on leadership. Even within the mining industry at present, we haven't got leadership. Scargill is fighting a lone battle; others are just fighting for positions.

Bolton is a classical example of this, and so are some of the delegates who are told exactly what to do – not advised, but told, instead of thinking for themselves. This made the delegates weak during the miners' strike, and it's made some of the new delegates who have come up subsequently weaker still. They expect guidance and all they get is dictation. If the delegates were functioning properly, there is no way they would have been saying, supposedly on behalf of their members (but in fact at Bolton's behest) "no recommendation" in the leadership election. If the delegates had been true delegates, they would have had to consult the membership.

Of course the Tories didn't beat the NUM off completely. The fact that Scargill – the best leader that the miners have ever had – was re-elected as president, showed that the union was still there and still fighting. And he won that election with no help from the press, the TV, or anyone else in fact he was being bombarded from every direction. He not only had Walsh standing against him, but the likes of Bolton and Clarke stabbing him in the back.

Although it is not as strong as it used to be, the union is still there. The fact is that the Coal Board now think there is no such thing as an agreement; they just want to lay the law down. Scargill won't tolerate those things, and some of the miners still left in the pits are of the same mind.

9. The victimised miners

At Polmaise we had the first victimised miners in Britain. They were sacked in March 1984, right at the beginning of the strike, when we organised the sit-in at the pit to draw attention to the danger of management sabotage.

Because of our concern about safety, we had four men who agreed to work, Jimmy Graham, Alex McCallum, Jim O'Hare, and James Rennie. We actually went to the management – myself, the chairman and the secretary of the NUM branch – and told him that we had four men working on the back shift. They agreed to this. The men were let down the pit in the normal way, with their tokens, passed into the sections by the firemen. By this time the management had contacted Edinburgh and said there were men down the pit at Polmaise, and were told to bring them up. It was at this point that the four strikers decided to sit down the pit. Management refused to give them any work they didn't want NUM men down there, of course, because management intentions were, as they had tried previously, to flood the pit.

Our men stayed down from Thursday to Saturday, when George Bolton came to the pit and instructed them to come up. Staying down a pit to protest was nothing new – it had happened in years gone by and, as far as I know, no miner had ever been sacked for doing it. And even here at Polmaise, the management said nothing when the men came up, but waited eleven days and then sacked them.

There were two other men who were at the pit at the time of the sit-in, but not actually involved in it – Bobby Purdie and Bob Curley, who were pumpers, doing safety work. They were asked to come and speak to the manager, a quarter of an hour before the end of their shift. They asked the oversman who would be in charge of the pumps. He said, nobody. So they refused to come up the pit until the shift was finished, because the pumps have to be looked after. When these two men arrived at the surface, they were sacked for not carrying out the manager's instructions; at a later date, they converted this charge to say that they were sacked for a breach of the Coal Mines Act, for going down the pit without a token. And we can prove, as the checker involved will testify, that they were not down the pit without a token. No miner would go down a pit without a token, nor would they have been passed into the sections without one.

The management then came up with the argument that they had started a new emergency token system: all we can say to that is, if they did, they never told the union about it, and never told the checker about it. The fact is that a new emergency token system was started, but this was at a later date. Management came up with this story because they knew well that the original reason they gave – disobeying instructions, in circumstances where they would have to ignore safety procedures to obey – was no reason for sacking anybody. I believe they just picked on these two men to intimidate us all.

Alex Laird was sacked in this same incident. He had been doing safety work – top of the cage inspecting the shaft – with the agreement of management and the union. Members of management were pressurising the banksman, a man called Willie McInerney, and accusing him of letting cameras down the pit the day previously, to do news stories about the sit-in.

McInerney was very worried by the whole business, he had a heart attack, and had to be taken home.

Now there has to be a banksman on at all times, if there are men underground; he is the man who bells them up and down the pit. So when McInerney went home, certain managers asked Alex Laird to go on to his job. Laird said he didn't think he was qualified for it – and indeed he wasn't, and had he done the job and problems had arisen, he would have been jailed for being there and the manager jailed for putting him on the job. Still, he didn't refuse to do the job; he went to ask our chairman, Geordie Goodwillie, what to do. Geordie had been down the pit on a safety job, and was having a shower. When Alex went off to speak to Geordie, they sacked him. Alex Laird was sacked, and remains sacked, for doing his job – nothing else. There was no justification for it whatsoever.

Frank Weston was sacked at the same time. He was alleged to have let cameras down the pit to take photos of the sit-in. But

Frank, part of whose job involved security at the pit, would never have done this. It was, again, simply an attempt to intimidate the Polmaise miners.

When these miners got the sack, I got straight on to McGahey and informed him. He said, "Try and get a meeting with the pit manager." The normal procedure was that, if anyone was sacked for whatever reason, and I wanted to meet the manager, I would put that in writing; then he would meet me, and if we didn't agree on anything, it would go to the next stage, which was the agents.

So I wrote a letter in to the manager, and he agreed to meet me. At that meeting, not only the manager of Polmaise, but the Scottish area production manager, was there – and he shouldn't have been, because it wasn't the stage of the process at which he should have been involved.

Under no circumstances would they give these men their jobs back. The meeting lasted as long as six hours, in the manager's office. That was the only meeting held with management about sacked miners throughout the coalfield.

Victimised miners at Polmaise, 1986; (left to right): Jimmy Graham, Jim O'Hare, Alex McCallum, Frank Weston, James Rennie and Bobby Purdie

Management's attitude was intransigent. For example I brought up all the above-mentioned facts about Alex Laird's case. One of the management representatives said it was all right, that all this had just been a misunderstanding. He said, "Alex Laird's job is safe; he will still be working." Then another of the managers butted in and said, "Is that the shaftsman you are referring to, Alex Laird?" The other man replied that it was, and the superior one of the two said, "Just put him in the same boat as the rest, sack him." All this was in a minute of the meeting, signed by myself and the assistant manager at the pit.

Jim Maguire was one of 14 miners arrested one day at Longannet – they were all sacked, but the 13 others got their jobs back, but not Jim. Marty Stewart and Brian McKinlay were lifted at Longannet, and not sacked but the day they went back to work after the strike, an official at the pit drew the manager's attention to the fact that these two

had been fined for breach of the peace, so the manager sacked them as well. John Swain was sacked after a situation that arose with the security men at Polmaise gates. And there were others sacked in this area, who hadn't worked at Polmaise, but who were attached to our centre after the strike.

* * *

Frank Weston died after the strike. I think the pressure of being sacked contributed to his poor health. After Frank's death, we contacted the NUM and the lawyers and asked them what position Mrs Weston was in as regards compensation, should it be proved that Frank was wrongly sacked. They said that the Coal Board completely washed their hands of responsibility towards her. There is no possibility that she will be eligible for compensation now.

Marty Stewart and Brian McKinlay were started again, about two years after the strike. But the four who were in the sit-in never got their jobs back; nor Alex Laird who was doing safety work, nor the two pumpers who were sacked at the same time. None of them got their jobs back. Neither has John Swain or Jim Maguire. So now, five years later, there are still nine members of the NUM branch who remain sacked.

* * *

After the strike we continued to have meetings here at Polmaise every Thursday for the sacked miners, up at the pit – as long as it was open. We also collected for the sacked miners' fund at the pit, both Thursdays and Fridays. We got stick off the management of course. They sent for the police and things like that, but we just kept going.

The sacked men went to area meetings for sacked miners at Fishcross. I wasn't allowed to go with them, even when I was the pit delegate handling their cases. Bolton put a stop to me attending. They were trying to say the sacked miners were part of the NUM, but at the same time isolate them as a group on their own.

I didn't see anything constructive coming out of these meetings at Fishcross, and I told the sacked men at Polmaise that in my opinion they would peter out eventually. That's what happened. Now they are more or less on their own.

You could count on one hand the number of meetings organised by the Scottish area about the victimised miners, and the meetings that were held, were forced upon the union by the men themselves. Since I was involved with the sacked men here at Polmaise – I made it my business after the strike to follow every detail of their cases – I asked to attend these meetings. But Bolton and company barred me at every opportunity.

Just after the miners' strike, in April 1985, there was a national delegate conference at which the question of the victimised men was discussed. It was agreed it should be a big priority for the miners. Jack Collins from Kent moved that the conference be recalled in October of that year, but I don't believe it was in the end. I went down to the conference with Alex McCallum; as we went in there was a reporter looking for miners to give him a run-down on the strike. We saw him going to men but they all walked away. No wonder – we went up and asked him what paper he worked for, and he said the *Coal News*!

In June 1985, at the Scottish area NUM conference following the strike, myself and Davie Hamilton raised the question of the victimised miners as forcibly as we could. I remember being told to sit down three times by George Bolton, who was chairing the conference in McGahey's absence. He said I was using the rostrum to push the case of the sacked miners, instead of speaking on the resolution under discussion – and so I was.

At one point, Peter Heathfield came to Edinburgh and spoke to the sacked men about what was happening in other parts of the country. I wrote to Eric Clarke, asking if I could attend, as part of the work I was doing to follow through the sacked men's cases, and he said no; I wrote to Heathfield, and he said as far as he was concerned I could attend, but the Scottish area had the last say. So I couldn't go. At this meeting, Heathfield told the sacked men quite bluntly that things were at a standstill. Every time the cases went anywhere near the Coal Board, they just hit a brick wall.

In the wider labour movement, there was support for the victimised miners. The support group set up during the miners' strike in Stirling, by Rowland Sheret and the trades council, continued to work on this, and again it's got to be said that their work was really excellent. Then there were rallies of various kinds in the labour movement – May Day rallies or meetings about some other issue – and the victimised men were

incorporated into these. But there has never been a rally centred principally on that issue.

There was also a national campaign that was supposed to bring all these efforts together. But at a certain point, Bolton and Clarke were sent there on behalf of the NUM nationally. It wasn't long before it died a natural death.

The time came when the victimised men became an embarrassment to the Scottish area. They hoped that things would take their course and the problem would disappear – and although the problem hasn't disappeared, all action on it has. There are no public meetings to alert people to the fact that there are still miners sacked; even at Labour Party conferences and the like, it never gets mentioned.

* * *

Another issue related to the victimised men was privatisation. While we were fighting to get the men's jobs back, work was being offered within the pits – with private "cowboy" firms who were undermining the nationalised industry.

Before the strike, underground work of any type whatsoever was done by NCB employees; but when work started on the Castlebridge mine after the strike, Thyssen and other private companies were involved. We were opposed to this from the start. But every plan that George MacAlpine, the Coal Board area director, put in front of the Scottish area NUM leaders was agreed to. They have not fought on anything since the miners' strike, but have accepted everything the Coal Board has thrown at them.

At the Scottish area NUM conference in June 1987 a resolution was passed, drawing attention to the growing threat of privatisation in the industry, and saying that the union would not allow private firms to come inside the pit gates.

Literally two days after the conference, the sacked miners at Polmaise got a letter from George Bolton, dated June 5th 1987, which stated: "I have to advise that arising from recent discussions with British Coal, they have accepted the principle that Private Mining Companies, operating in the Scottish coal industry, may recruit victimised miners." Application forms for AMCO, Cementation and Thyssen were actually enclosed with Bolton's letter. I don't know what Bolton's ideas were, but he had clearly decided there was to be no fight to stop private firms going into the pits.

As trade unionists, the sacked men did not want to apply for jobs with the private firms – but the NUM area leadership more or less forced them to do so. The sacked men had the application forms, which the NUM was asking them to return to its Edinburgh headquarters to be forwarded to the private firms. Bolton and co said that if the sacked men went to a tribunal, and the other side said they had been offered a job and had not taken it, their position would be weakened.

The *Stirling Observer* asked the Polmaise sacked miners what they thought about this. Robert Curley was interviewed, and said: "I feel both betrayed and let down by the NUM. The letter was a diabolical liberty" (*Stirling Observer*, June 24th 1987).

Because I was still looking after the men's cases, I was also interviewed, and I stated that the NUM should be arguing with the Coal Board to get the miners re-instated, back into their own type of work at their own collieries. Of the Scottish area NUM I said, "Such a letter to the victimised miners indicates to me they are running away from the true issue." Bolton was also interviewed, and said about me: "He abandoned the industry... I don't feel he is in a position to say anything."

This sparked off a major controversy in the *Stirling Observer*. Two local councillors, Eddie Carrick and Terry McMeel, who was a former delegate at Polmaise, were interviewed, and attacked Bolton for what they described as an "outrageous statement". Rowland Sheret from the trades council was interviewed, and attacked Bolton as "unjustified and hypocritical". I myself challenged Bolton to debate the issue of the victimised miners on any public platform. Bolton, who had just been elected president of the Scottish area in McGahey's place at that time, wrote to the *Stirling Observer* with an "unreserved apology" to me (*Stirling Observer*, July 8th 1987). But of course the policy for which he was originally attacked, both by myself and the sacked miners, still stands – the Scottish area NUM actively encouraged the sacked men to seek work with the private contractors.

* * *

At first, nobody thought of taking the cases of the victimised miners to an industrial tribunal. Most people in the NUM assumed that, whatever happened at the end of the strike, there would be an amnesty for sacked men, as there had been in the 1972 strikes. Furthermore, the NUM and NCB had always had their own disputes procedure and resorting to an industrial tribunal on any issue was unknown. But as the strike dragged on, and it became clear that the Coal Board intended that the sacked men should never work in the coal industry again, things changed. It was decided by the Scottish executive that we should take cases to industrial tribunal.

One of our union committee members, John Perrie, filled the forms in applying for industrial tribunal hearings, and sent them up to the NUM office in Edinburgh. But we had not used the method of industrial tribunal before in the mining industry. In the case of those miners who had been sacked early on, the time limit of three months, within which the forms had to be submitted, was already passed. These men were "time-barred" from getting a hearing, the Industrial Tribunal forms having been held back by the Scottish area.

When we realised what had happened, we urged the Scottish area NUM to get all the other forms in as quickly as possible. But this was not done, with the result that more men were "time-barred" unnecessarily; this caused great anger among the sacked men.

The victimised men's right to a hearing was contested in the courts. A preliminary court hearing agreed that they should have the right to take their cases to an industrial tribunal. But then the Coal Board appealed against this, on the grounds that the forms had not been submitted in time, and won their appeal. The whole case went up before three law lords in January 1989, and the decision, announced in March 1989, was in the men's favour.

(There was a further complication in Jim Maguire's case. The union would have nothing to do with taking Jim Maguire's case to a tribunal. They said his form should have been in. For some reason the date on his form was altered, and we drew the attention of the lawyers to this; they said he must have altered it, and we pointed out that if he had wanted to falsify the form he would obviously have gone and got a new one. I took up Jim's case, together with those of two NUM members in this area who worked at Castlehill, Harry Lynch and Danny McCorgoray. We went to a preliminary hearing of the tribunal; they said that the NUM Scottish area, as the legal advisers to these men, should have made sure that the case went to the tribunal.)

That's how it stands at the time of writing, pending the tribunal hearings. There is nothing else being organised for the sacked miners.

* * *

I presume the men who sat down the pit at Hem Heath, to oppose the national strike, are still working in the coal industry – unless they have retired, in which case they will have had all the pension and other monies due to them. But the men who sat down Polmaise pit, in an effort to ensure its safety, have nothing.

I feel very sad about the plight of these men, who were leading lights at the colliery – and of the other sacked men too. No-one has blamed the local union, but the fact is that we all decided that those men should go down the pit that day; there was no shortage of volunteers, but it was those four who actually went down, representing the rest of us.

Those who were sacked at the time of the sit-in have been sacked for five years. The strike has been over for four years. We have tried everywhere to get jobs for the victimised miners; we had some hope with the district council, with whom we have had meetings, and with whom some of the sacked miners got temporary jobs. But at the time of writing, some of the victimised men are still out of work.

If a Labour government ever gets to power again, their cases have to be looked at. The question of compensation for these men – something that Tony Benn has raised many times – has to be dealt with. The victimised miners are just as important now as they were during the strike. They cannot be forgotten.

10. The closure of Polmaise

When Polmaise was finally closed, on July 17th 1987, it was still a developing pit; there were 112 men still working there.

The mines had been driven and there were about 15 sections of coal ready for taking. This would have provided seven or eight years' work mining coal, and that's disregarding the further potential 30 or 40 years' work mining the Bandeath coal.

British Coal announced the closure of the pit on July 15th 1987. They had put more than £15 million in it before the strike, and a similar amount after the strike. This time they didn't make any excuses about supposed "geological faulting", nor did they say there were no markets for the coal. They just said they wanted to invest the money elsewhere in the Scottish coalfield. From any economic point of view it was crazy.

Having got rid of many of the men who fought so hard during the strike, the Board finally got their way. Even though many of those who had been most active during the strike were now gone, the miners at Polmaise voted to invoke the official review procedure in another attempt to save the pit. But NACODS voted to accept closure.

Not surprisingly, no lead for a fight came from the NUM at Scottish level. They gave no advice to the men about what to do. The delegate and secretary at the pit at the time were raw as far as fighting to keep pits open was concerned; they didn't know what they were up against – not only with the Coal Board,, but with their own union officials. The Scottish area NUM shanghaied these committee members a few times, failing to give them the necessary information about how to fight for their jobs.

I think if the members of the committee who had been there during the strike had been at the pit, neither the Coal Board nor the Scottish area officials would have got away with that. We would have been arguing very strongly to keep the pit open.

The younger men in the pit were very despondent when it finally closed. We had fought hard, for a full year, and although the NUM did not win the strike as a whole, we won it from Polmaise's point of view because the threat of closure made in January 1984 was withdrawn. The Coal Board came with another £20 million after the strike. But they soon changed their minds yet again and this time it really was the end.

The men left in the pit at that stage were transferred to other pits for a three-month trial period. They were told that if they didn't like the place where they were sent, they could take the option of "voluntary redundancy". Of those 112 men, I think there are only four or five still working over the water in Fife. Nineteen tried it out on a temporary basis but packed in after a number of weeks. The rest took redundancy straight away when the pit closed.

* * *

When they shut a pit down, they never take any of the machinery out, and so it was with Polmaise. It is usually too costly to pay men the shifts needed to recover machinery. So of course there are millions of pounds' worth of machinery lying underground.

In the case of Polmaise, the pit was shut, and the shaft cemented up, all within a few months. They hired some of the miners who had worked as shaftsmen, men who had been paid off, to do this work. The shafts were capped and filled in with cement.

In the two years before closure, they had converted some of the workshops and offices in the pit for new technology. The blacksmith's shop at the pit, for example, was converted and millions of pounds' worth of stuff installed. They had brought in machines so that a man sitting in the office could tell where the coal cutter was, whether a pump had broken down or gone on fire, or if there was water rising anywhere. None of this was ever used.

What happened to our union box was sickening. Right after the strike it had been moved from where it had always been, round the back of the baths, into the middle of the yard, 20 yards from the managers' office. There he could try to keep an eye on it, and stop the sacked miners and people like myself from going in and using it, although we went in there anyway. When the pit shut down, management just burned everything belonging to the NUM, including all the union files and the banner.

If that old hut could have spoken, it would

The site of Polmaise pit, March 1989

have a few tales to tell! There were many arguments in there. Even when it was built, we in the NUM pulled a fast one on our friends in SCEBTA. The dividing wall in the hut should have been about two metres further into our side than it was, but when the joiner was in, we came and told him to build the wall further into their side, to give us, the larger union, more room!

* * *

By the time Polmaise closed, the Scottish coalfield was in a state of decline. Polkemmet colliery had been closed after the strike; Comrie had gone in 1986; so had Killoch, the largest colliery in Ayrshire. Castlehill stayed on a bit longer, but work is now concentrated at Castlebridge, and Castlehill is a training pit. Since Polmaise closed, Seafield and Barony have also gone. Production has stopped at Frances and Monktonhall, and everybody believes that pits like these are being made ready for privatisation. There are only three large units remaining – Bilston Glen, Solsgirth and Castlebridge – and now British Coal has announced its intention to shut Bilston. They are actually doing away, bit by bit, with the full mining industry in Scotland.

Of course Scargill came out and said, way before the strike, that they would close 70 pits and 70,000 jobs would be destroyed, and this was denied by the Coal Board and others. But it has all come to fruition. Scargill said they would destroy half the jobs in the Scottish coalfield and they have gone even further than that. But all you read about Scargill in the press is that his head is supposedly down, he is losing his battles.

He is getting persecuted for nothing at all. By making that warning, and fighting on the basis of it, he was only doing his job, and carrying out the resolutions that had been passed at miners' conferences.

The closure of the pits is not only an economic policy: it's the Tory way of dealing with the NUM which was a thorn in their side for many years.

* * *

I estimate that two-thirds of those who used to work in Polmaise pit – perhaps three-quarters – are now unemployed. Some ex-miners are driving taxis or doing various jobs in Stirling, but that's a handful. Although many of those who lost their jobs were over 50, there were a considerable number of younger men too. There were young lads of 20 or 30. It's the same in villages nearby like Cowie, Plean and Bannockburn.

There is not much for them to do all day. Some of them have got themselves dogs, and they go for walks. But they actually do nothing during the day. They hang about corners. The only thing they have is the miners' welfare, where they can get a game of snooker.

Thatcher talks about people setting up small businesses, but it hasn't happened here. Some of the younger lads went to a school to re-train, learning to be mechanics, joiners etc. But that only lasts a short period of time, and the ones who went on it haven't really progressed as far as finding a job is concerned. They are still unemployed at

present. Then there are one or two lads who went back into the pits, over at Castlebridge, working for private firms – those are the only kind of jobs that are available.

The conditions with them are completely different to what they were when they worked in the pits for the NCB. They are starting on a Monday day-shift, then doing a Tuesday night-shift, then maybe a Wednesday back shift – they don't really know what shift they are actually on. Then some of them have started, done two or three weeks work, and then been paid off, and re-started again. If they are on mine-driving, for example, and that job finishes, that's them finished – they have to be re-employed again. So within a two- or three-year period they have maybe been sacked three or four times. The men on these jobs are NUM members – but that sort of unionisation means nothing.

The sacked miners have had it hardest of all. Some of them applied to some of the private firms, eventually, but nothing came out of it. They had had no intention of working with private firms at first, their intention was to get back to their own type of work, in their own colliery. But as I explained before, they were more or less forced into asking for work with the privateers.

The community of Fallin won't be broken up as a result of the pit closure. The social life hasn't changed since the pit shut down. The miners' club still functions as it did before; all its facilities are still available; it still does its old folks' trips, its entertainments – and it's still as busy as ever at weekends. Remember that the miners' welfare in Cowie, where the pit closed down in the 1960s, is still going as strong as ever.

But people haven't got jobs; they don't have so much money as they did when they were working. They don't get out and about as often as they used to.

* * *

The other thing that Fallin has lost as a result of the pit closure is a landmark. The winding gear was a distinguishing feature of the village. If you were coming into Fallin, it used to be the first thing you would see. It was something you would give somebody directions by. You would say to strangers, if they were coming to Fallin, "You'll know it by the pit, the first thing you'll see as you come from Kincardine way is the pit bing; the miners' club is right next to it."

The land the pit stood on now belongs to the regional council. There was some talk of them turning the pit bing into a ski slope, but whether this will come to fruition or not I don't know.

As for the pit-head winding gear, it was all taken away within months of the pit closing. The office blocks are still standing, but they have been gutted; the baths, the lamp cabins and everything else has been put to the ground. It's all away. You wouldn't even know there had been a pit there.

When I drive down past the site where the pit used to be, I have to turn my head and look the other way.

* * *

Afterword

by Simon Pirani

Rereading this book after 25 years, I remember many of the events described as if they happened yesterday. The sheer force of the mining communities' resistance to the Thatcher government changed many people's lives, and their views of the world. I grew up in London and became involved with the labour movement far away from mining communities. But for me, as for many others, the miners' struggle was a fireball that burned through old ways of doing things and exposed old ways of thinking to a fierce, interrogating light.

There is now a substantial body of books, films, plays and other media that record aspects of the miners' fight. John McCormack's account remains particularly valuable because it focuses on two themes that most other accounts neglect. First, it describes the bitter resistance to pit closures in Scotland from 1982 on, that fed into the national strike of 1984-85. Second, it discusses frankly the disputes within the miners' union about how to react to the Tory onslaught.

Below is the Afterword I wrote for this book in 1989, describing how John McCormack

and I came to work together, and how I saw the political issues surrounding the strike. I see those things differently now. I am no longer a Trotskyist. Trotskyism played a hugely important part in the history of 20th century socialism, and – even as interpreted by the politically corrupted Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) of which I was a member – propelled my comrades and I to the Scottish coalfield in the first place. But the WRP also became a sort of ideological straightjacket on us.

This is evident in the text below. I was so obsessed with the "struggle for leadership" as a narrow political concept (i.e. between the Trotskyists and the Communist Party), that I said nothing about the very real examples of working-class leadership that John McCormack described. This includes the leadership given by the Kinneil miners who sat down their pit over Christmas 1982 (chapter 2); by John himself and others at Polmaise who risked their livelihoods to resist job transfers by which pit closures were prepared (chapter 3); by the miners' wives and partners, and transport union members, who challenged that union's officials over strikebreaking coal shipments to Ravenscraig steelworks (towards the end of chapter 7); and by many others. But I am deeply grateful to John for helping me to get out of my straightjacket sufficiently to make sure that *his* story could be told.

There is one other key point on which, thankfully, my 1989 Afterword is out of date. I said that John's account was the first of any length about the strike in Scotland. At the time, that was true. But now we have a very fine book by Jim Phillips of the University of Glasgow: *Collieries, communities and the miners' strike in Scotland, 1984-85* (Manchester University Press, 2012). For anyone seeking a broader context for the story you have just read, that is a good starting point.

Afterword to the 1989 edition

Now the Polmaise miners' story has been honestly told. Their courage was magnificent, inspiring and unforgettable. It remains to say something about how John McCormack and I came to collaborate in writing this book, because it didn't happen by chance.

The election of Arthur Scargill to the NUM leadership in 1982, by a huge majority, signalled the miners' readiness to fight the Tory government. From then on, the state put in motion its plans to break the miners' union. The Workers Revolutionary Party, to which I belong, saw the coalfields as one of the principal grounds on which battles against the Tories would be fought. We tried, with our paper which was then called *News Line*, to strengthen our links with the miners.

We regarded such work in the Scottish coalfield as particularly important, because historically it was one of the bastions of Communist Party influence – and as Trotskyists, we saw the Stalinists of the CP leadership as the principal enemy within the workers' movement, an enemy which the working class had to unmask and defeat if the struggle for socialism was to go forward.

When the CP first took root among the Scottish miners in the early 1920s, it was completely different, in fact opposite, to what it is today. Its leaders, Willie Gallacher and others, were inspired by the 1917 Russian revolution, which they saw as the first blow struck by the working class in the international struggle for socialism. Gallacher and his comrades joined the Communist International, formed by V. I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky in 1919 to lead the fight for world revolution, and set out to win the best fighters in the workers' movement to communism. Their belief in a society which would end capitalist exploitation, and their contempt for corrupt reformist bureaucrats, attracted many Scottish miners.

The British CP, whose miner militants played such a heroic part in the explosive strike movements of 1921, degenerated – as the result not of a British process but an international one. After Lenin died in 1924, Joseph Stalin and the caste of bureaucrats he represented usurped power in the Soviet workers' state, and also took control of the Communist International. The perspective of international working-class revolution was replaced with the utopian theory of "socialism in one country' (the failure of which is today admitted by the self-same bureaucracy that supported it then).

Communists like Gallacher were turned from working-class fighters into pliable agents of the Moscow bureaucracy, following a series of lines laid down in accordance with its needs. In the 1926 General Strike the British communists were encouraged not to rely on their own leadership qualities, but to put faith in the treacherous "left" reformists; in 1929 they followed Stalin's international

ultra-leftist line, and split the Scottish miners with the formation of the United Mineworkers of Scotland; back in a re-united union during the second world war, they fervently opposed all strikes in line with Moscow policy.

The generations of CP members who led the Scottish NUM after the war were trained as reformist bureaucrats, the opposite of the revolutionary communists of the 1920s. Will Paynter and Mick McGahey mastered the art of winning short-term trade union gains – at the expense of communist principles.

By the 1980s, British capitalism demanded a new kind of treachery from the labour and trade union leaders: a cowardly acceptance of wholesale closures, and a grovelling retreat before the anti-union laws. The CP leaders of George Bolton and Ken Gill's generation provided this sort of treachery – again, in the name of "communism"!

The way the CP leaders blocked and betrayed the Scottish miners' struggle, starting at Kinneil, can be seen in this book. These climb-downs paved the way to open CP support for six-day working, privateering, and unity with the UDM scabs – support which placed them, after the miners' strike, on the extreme right wing of the workers' movement.

The Trotskyist movement came into being, internationally, in the 1920s, fighting to uphold the communist perspective of international revolution against Stalin and the bureaucracy. That is why we in the WRP had been trained despite that organisation's grave weaknesses to regard the CP's Stalinist leaders as our most important opponents in the workers' movement. So when Scottish miners found themselves in conflict with the McGahey-Bolton leadership, especially after the Kinneil episode, it wasn't surprising that many of them gave us a hearing: we were the Scottish NUM leaders' most outspoken opponents. Miners asked us, "Are you communists?" We replied, "Yes, real communists, the opposite of the CP".

We worked and talked together with miners before and during the 1984-1985 strike, including those at Polmaise. Under our old leadership, we made many, many mistakes. After the strike and, in large part, because of the effect it had on us we threw that old leadership out. Since then we have discussed our failures in depth (this is not the place to explain the details of that); at the same time, we continued our fight in the workers' movement, trying to base ourselves on what we learned. The work I have done with John McCormack is part of that.

Five years after the miners' strike, the greatest struggle by British workers since The war, this book is the first account of any length of the strike in Scotland and the resistance to pit closures that led up to it.

Nothing of note has been published by the leaders of the Scottish NUM or Scottish TUC, who usually churn out "official" versions of labour history in great quantities. Perhaps they haven't yet worked out how to re-write the story of the great strike to hide their shameful role. Perhaps they hope that story will fade from memory. Many in the British workers' movement think that way.

But the miners' strike will not be forgotten. It lives on in the working class. The huge step forward by the miners' wives, by the support groups, cannot be reversed. The gigantic lesson learned by workers about the capitalist state, and above all about the TUC and Labour leaders who capitulated to it, cannot be rubbed out.

Many in the labour movement look back on the miners' strike as a catastrophic defeat for the working class. It wasn't a defeat: it was a betrayal. Those who harp on about "defeat" cover up the real reason that the miners couldn't take their struggle any further: the treachery of the Stalinist and reformist trade union and Labour leaders. The miners didn't achieve their objective, to stop pit closures. But neither did the Tory government achieve theirs, to smash the NUM. The strike, far from being a war lost, was a battle which prepared the way for future workers' battles in Britain. These are part of the struggle of the international working class for socialism, in which we real communists have complete confidence.

In the course of this struggle, the working class will have to resolve the problem of leadership with which the heroic miners at Polmaise, and their wives and their supporters, were confronted.

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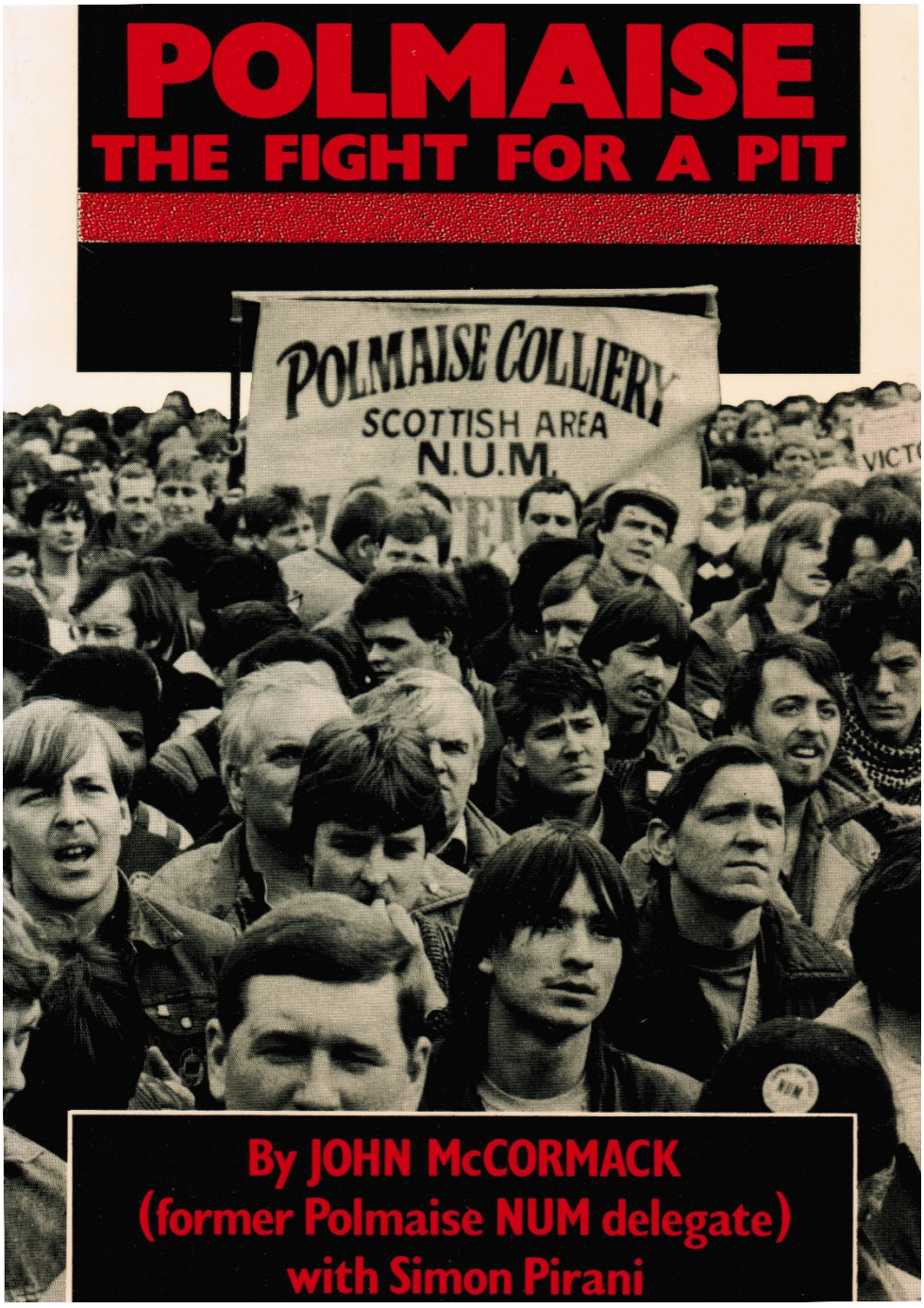

The 1989 edition of this book

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