The Miners’ Strike in Britain, 1984-85

Jim Phillips, University of Glasgow

Focus
In the miners’ strike of 1984-85 in Britain a complicated welter of issues were involved: energy and environmental politics; coal industry finances; the position of women in the strike and gender politics in the coalfields; policing, public order and civil liberties; the role of the Labour Party; and the contested strategy and tactics of the strikers. ‘In the cutting of coal there is noise and dust and unwanted stone’, wrote Raymond Williams in the late 1980s. ‘Similarly,’ he continued, ‘in the coal strike there are central issues of great importance to the society, but around them, and often obscuring them, the noise and dust and stone of confused, short-term or malignant argument.’ The key obscured issues were the class divisions which formed the heart of the strike, and the
ideological nature of the struggle between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Conservative government.

Confronted by neo-liberalism, authoritarian management and deindustrialisation, the strikers’ defence of their jobs and pits involved a campaign for communal economic security, workplace rights and trade union voice in public policy-making. Their campaign was defeated by the overwhelming power of the state, mobilised by the Government. Various forces and resources – the police, the courts and anti-trade union allies in business and the media – were deployed to neuter, impoverish, intimidate and victimise the strikers. The strike was perhaps the last major campaign pursued in Britain by industrial workers with an explicitly class perspective. This class focus was a strength but also a weakness, dividing the miners from potential supporters. Later campaigns of the left would be more successful when working-class interests were defended within a broader cross-class mobilisation.

The miners’ campaign emerged in the winter of 1980-81. Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government, elected in 1979, pressed the National Coal Board (NCB), which managed the industry on behalf of the state, to lower costs and become entirely self-financing by 1984. This was ambitious. Recession and business closures – illustrated by the 1979-82 doubling of unemployment to 3 million – substantially lowered demand for coal-fired electricity. Adjusting supply to fit demand implied closing pits where production was most expensive. The threat to jobs was clear, particularly in Scotland, Northumberland, Durham, South Wales, parts of Yorkshire, and Kent, where challenging geological conditions elevated costs. In February 1981 miners in these areas joined an unofficial strike against NCB plans to reduce production by 10%. Still heavily reliant on NCB coal, the Government ended this strike by relaxing cash limits, but the retreat was temporary: the NCB stockpiled coal and the trend to alternatives – nuclear, oil- and gas-fired plant – was accelerated. The miners’ temper was reflected in 1982, when Arthur Scargill, campaigning to defend pits, was elected President of the NUM with 70% of the vote.
The campaign continued in 1983. The Monopolies and Mergers Commission, appointed to investigate NCB finances, recommended a 10% cut in capacity. The NUM claimed there was a secret hit list, to close 75 pits with the loss over three years of 64,000 of the industry’s 200,000 jobs. Documents released under the 30-year rule in 2014 demonstrated that Thatcher discussed this list on 15 September 1983 with Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, and Norman Tebbit, Secretary of State for Employment. But at the time both Government and NCB obfuscated, conceding only that perhaps 20 pits might be lost. The NCB was under new management, Thatcher appointing Ian MacGregor as Chairman. MacGregor was a Scots-American businessman, outgoing Chairman of the British Steel Corporation (BSC), where costs and union influence had been radically reduced through closures with employment cut from 166,000 in 1980 to 71,000 in 1983. Literature on the miners’ strike often relates its origins to MacGregor’s appointment, but anti-union methods were already being pioneered by NCB managers, notably Albert Wheeler, Scottish Area Director, who closed several pits in 1982-83 and instructed pit managers to abandon workplace agreements with unions.

The trigger for the strike is usually identified as the announcement in the first week of March 1984 that Cortonwood near Rotherham would close. Yorkshire union representatives pledged to resist this through strike action, infuriated too by the proposed closure of Bullcliffe Wood in Wakefield, and emboldened by news that Snowdon in Kent, Herrington in Durham and Polmaise in Scotland would also shut. At Polmaise, near Stirling, miners were on strike before the Cortonwood announcement, and 50% of Scotland’s miners were already in dispute with their managers, fighting closures and Wheeler’s incursions on their workplace rights.

**Contention**

The miners’ campaign challenged two major tenets of Thatcherite political economy: first, that the value of economic activity should be measured by financial criteria alone; and second, that
union voice should not compromise managerial powers of decision-making.

Campaigners rejected the contention that mines should close on economic grounds. This countered prevailing thinking in the 1980s, as ‘viability’ – to paraphrase Andrew Glyn – was incrementally associated with ‘profitability’. Pits not making money for the NCB should be closed, argued the Government. Yet NCB performance data was highly problematic, including expenditure arising from past activities, such as compensation for subsidence, pensions to retired employees and payments to redundant miners. Pit-level performance itself was highly subjective, and varied according to investment. The social costs of non-production were also emphasised by campaigners, with redundancy payments followed by unemployment maintenance, coupled with lost tax revenues and multiplier effects in coalfield areas, including reduced consumer expenditure. The industry provided vital glue that would be lost with the pits: employment, income and a varied social infrastructure of welfare and sports clubs, educational resources, musical bands, and activities for youth and pensioners.

The strikers and their supporters defended also the value of trade union voice in the making of important business decisions. On the Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal (CMGC), which she chaired twice weekly in the first six months of the strike, Thatcher recurrently emphasised that the NCB could not agree to any settlement compromising its power to decide whether pits should be closed or remain open. This was the fundamental question of the campaign, which duly represented a barrier to the Government’s broader economic ambitions, including the erosion of union rights and the privatisation of utilities, services and industries. Privatisation was opposed by unions, fearing the consequences of stronger managerial and shareholder control: redundancy and an ever-lowering of wages and employment security.

This challenge posed by strikers has sometimes been characterised as conservative as well as radical. They were resisting authority, but only to preserve an unaltered coalfield order. Miners
were not, in fact, atavistically opposed to change, although they resented the imposition of closures by a hostile employer and Government. The strikers recognised that mining was essentially a dynamic industry. From the 1950s to the 1970s miners had accepted many adjustments to their economic and social order on the basis of negotiation and agreement. In the 1960s NCB employment more than halved, from 700,000 to 300,000. Smaller and older pits closed with redundancies accepted partly because the NCB invested in a new generation of larger pits, with prospects of greater viability and sustainability. Wider economic and social policies were also important to the acceptance of this restructuring, with the 1964-70 Labour governments substantially increasing incentives to manufacturing industry to locate in the coalfields, particularly in Scotland, South Wales, Northumberland, and Durham. This might be termed the ‘moral economy’ of coalfield restructuring. Miners accepted pit closures if changes were negotiated and agreed, and where their individual and communal economic security was protected through the availability of meaningful and comparably-paid employment. Neither of these criteria applied in the 1980s, where closures were pursued unilaterally by management, against workforce opposition, amid deindustrialisation and rising unemployment.

So the campaign had to be fought, but it could not be won. The nature and scale of the opposition marshalled by the Government is demonstrated by four key strands of evidence. First, NCB-NUM so-called peace talks, seeking an agreed formula for pit closures, were routinely sabotaged by the Government, insisting upon conditions that consolidated managerial sovereignty on the central issue and could not be accepted by the strikers. The CMGC minutes of 30 May, 11 July, and 12 September amply illustrate this vital point. NUM leaders have been criticised for their inflexible approach to negotiations: conceding the economic case for some closures might have slowed the rate of deindustrialisation. But the NUM could not agree that management should always have the final say: this would certainly have been rejected by many if not the majority of the strikers. Second,
throughout the strike Thatcher personally intervened in policing matters, ensuring that pickets were prevented from mustering at power stations, steel works, and other pressure points, as well as at collieries – especially in Nottinghamshire – where miners were working. Third, the Government urged the NCB to institute and then accelerate a back-to-work movement, providing additional financial incentives to strike breakers, and safe transport to and from their workplace. Fourth, the Government was involved, albeit tangentially, in a complex set of legal manoeuvres against the NUM. A key figure was David Hart, businessman and occasional adviser to Thatcher and MacGregor, who encouraged working miners to sue the NUM over the legality of the strike. In September the High Court in London restrained the NUM from characterising the strike as official. The NUM leaders felt obliged to defy this restraint, leading in October to the sequestration of union assets in England and Wales, although not in Scotland, where separate legal jurisdiction ruled the strike lawful. Thatcher’s papers show she followed closely the anti-strike litigation, which exacerbated the NUM’s difficulties.

The Government’s strike-breaking effort was expensive. Estimates coalesce around £6 billion – about £14 billion in 2015 values – in disappearing production and tax revenues, replacement coal stocks and additional oil burn charges, along with reduced economic activity more generally plus the huge expense of policing. This outweighed the NCB’s projected financial losses for producing coal in the financial year of 1984-85, some £100 million, by a factor of 60 to one. This ‘worthwhile investment’, in Nigel Lawson’s words, was central to the Government’s larger ambition of redistributing resources and authority from employees to employers, to liberate business interests and strengthen market forces.

Methods
The legal moves against the strike illustrated divisions that weakened the campaign. NUM strategy and tactics arguably widened these divisions. The strategic goal was to impose economic costs
on the Government, and so force a U-turn on closures. This required a complete stoppage of coal production through strike action but there was no national ballot of members. Instead the federal structure of the union was deployed so that its discrete areas – Yorkshire, Scotland and so on – could initiate area strikes. These areas encouraged others to join by picketing pits where miners continued working. There was a rationale for this approach. Miners in Yorkshire and Scotland already on strike would probably not have returned had a ballot gone against them. A national ballot might have secured a strike majority and a complete cessation of production could have followed. Victory would probably still have evaded the campaigners, however, given the Government’s willingness to expend huge economic premiums in pursuit of its anti-trade union goals. Power cuts and the bill for a massive increase in imports would surely have been added to Lawson’s tally of a ‘worthwhile investment’. Without a ballot the campaign was in any case damaged, notably in Nottinghamshire, where all but 3,000 of the area’s 40,000 miners worked throughout the strike. Economically, working miners believed – mistakenly, it would transpire – that closures were a remote or non-existent threat. Politically, many viewed the absent national ballot as breaking union rules, and were offended when miners from Yorkshire, Scotland and elsewhere picketed their pits.

Mass picketing of working mines, and similar actions at power stations and steel works, was accompanied by disorder and violence. Physical violence by strikers was concentrated mainly on working miners, their motor vehicles and homes. The small number of assaults on NCB property is notable but explicable in terms of the moral economy position that collieries belonged to the communities which depended upon them. These assets were rarely attacked by campaigners who were struggling to preserve them. The Government’s willingness to absorb the economic losses of strike has been noted. The true costs of the crowd actions were therefore borne by the strikers themselves. A thousand miners were sacked by the NCB for strike-related activities, 206 of them in Scotland. Many of those dismissed had
been charged by the police, but were then neither convicted nor even prosecuted. Despite this, a powerful narrative of union-instigated public disorder developed, bolstered by unsympathetic or hostile media coverage, notably the notorious BBC television news coverage of mass picketing in June 1984 at the BSC coke works at Orgreave in South Yorkshire. This first showed pickets hurling missiles at police lines, and then mounted officers charging through the strikers. The actual sequence of events was in reverse: the miners’ missiles followed the mounted police charge.

The narrative of public disorder constrained the campaigners’ capacity to build an anti-Government alliance. The Labour Party national leadership was defensive, distancing itself from the NUM and criticising the picketing of working miners, while expressing opposition to closures and sympathy with the generality of strikers. Outside of the labour movement there was limited support from Church leaders, but otherwise the strikers established meaningful contacts only with groups that were already marginalised and excoriated by the Government and its political and media supporters, notably the Greenham women campaigning against nuclear weapons, and gay and lesbian activists. An alternative course of action, particularly in the early months of the strike, might have involved campaigning instead of picketing in Nottinghamshire, persuading working miners that their jobs and communities were also in jeopardy. Explicit emphasis on political education, peaceful protest and cross-class action might have enabled the construction and mobilisation of a broader anti-Government compact. There was certainly scope for stronger labour movement mobilisation in defence of trade union voice, had the NUM leadership been more adroit in identifying this as a key issue. But this would have risked alienating support among non-union and non-working class groups, such was the ascendancy in the 1980s of arguments about the right of management to manage.

The strike ended in March 1985. The focus of the campaign had gradually changed. By February, realising there could be no agreement on closures, some NUM officials and activists – notably in Scotland – sought an end to the strike in return for the rein-
statement of all those sacked. But even this was not secured, after an NUM delegate conference voted to end the strike without any settlement. Deindustrialisation accelerated with damaging long-term consequences: there were limited alternatives for redundant miners. In the 2010s unemployment in all ex-coalfield communities remained well above the national UK average, accompanied by engrained social deprivation.

The campaign nevertheless had important positive outcomes. In mining communities it was led by men and women who found their experiences empowering and liberating as well as difficult and heart-breaking. The extent to which gender relations and politics in the coalfields were transformed can be exaggerated. Pre-strike miners were not an amorphous mass of macho cavemen, and coalfield women – certainly exploited in gender as well as class terms – were hardly downtrodden. Economic and social restructuring from the 1950s had provided coalfield women with wider employment opportunities, in assembly goods manufacturing as well as public services, which were an asset in 1984-85 as female wages lowered the household and community costs of striking. Generational changes were also important in narrowing gender inequalities before 1984. Sexism remained a regrettable feature of social relations in the coalfields both during and after the strike, but the campaign nevertheless increased the personal and collective confidence of the tens of thousands of women who fought for the pits and jobs that provided the basic economic substance of their communities. Women were especially vital in establishing contacts with supporters beyond the coalfields, speaking at trade union, workplace and community meetings and rallies, often in distant towns and cities, including events held by their national organisation, Women Against Pit Closures. Many women remained active politically after the strike, becoming elected councillors or trade union officers, and acquired formal educational qualifications or training that enabled them to secure more attractive jobs and careers.

The campaign had other tangible and lasting effects. Miners’ support groups outside the coalfields established networks of
activists who formed the basis in many communities of the successful anti-poll tax campaign of 1989-91. This resistance to the Conservative Government’s reform of socially-regressive local government financing, with the flat-rate Community Charge absorbing a greater proportion of low incomes, contributed to Thatcher’s resignation as Prime Minister in November 1990. In Scotland the miners’ campaign and the anti-poll tax struggle substantially weakened electoral support for the Conservative Party and public confidence in the unreformed constitutional structures of the UK. In this connection the results of the September 2014 Independence Referendum are highly significant: overall 44.7% of voters cast their ballots for Yes to Scottish Independence. The Yes vote exceeded this in all but one of the ex-coalfield local authority areas. Across the UK there were other important campaigns in the 2010s, connecting in different ways with 1984-85. Notable here is the call for a judicial investigation of policing during the strike. Particular attention focuses on South Yorkshire Police, where the organisation of fabricated evidence by officers in relation to the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster was apparently prefaced by similar malpractice in 1984-85, especially at Orgreave. A related campaign is being fought by those who were sacked in 1984-85, who found it even more difficult than other ex-miners to gain alternative work. Many of the victimised were secretly black-listed by anti-trade union employers because of their strike activism, often on the basis of intelligence supplied by police officers. These campaigns keep alive the memory of 1984-85, and its lessons about the importance of protecting and advancing the legal-political rights of trade unionists and the interests of the workers they represent.
Key Readings


Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson, “‘Side By Side With Our Men?’ Women’s Activism, Community and Gender in the 1984-85 British Miners’ Strike’, International Labor and Working Class History, 75 (2009), 68-84

Raymond Williams, ‘Mining the Meaning: Key Words in the Miners’ Strike’, in Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism (Verso, 1989), 120-27