

Introduction

By Paul Whetton

Secretary, Notts rank and file strike committee (in personal capacity)

We lost. There were victories, and some degree of victory in defeat at the end of the dispute, but still: we lost. The reasons why we lost are quite obvious. TUC and Labour Party support was not forthcoming, despite the promises made at TUC and Labour Party conferences. Rank and file Labour Party and trade union activists made a very valuable contribution in support work, but we needed the backing of the big battalions, in industrial action and in a political campaign to counter the Tory propaganda — and we didn't get it.

There was no political will to do it within the hierarchy of the TUC. They just didn't want to get involved with grabbing a tiger by the tail. Neither did Neil Kinnock. But, as I say, there were victories. For example, there are five pits working now that wouldn't be if we hadn't fought. We have shown the will and ability to fight in defence of our jobs and our communities. We've shown that it can be done. The rank and file miners have shown that it can be done.

We've learned valuable lessons, and not just the miners, but women and children too, in the mining communities and support groups up and down the length and breadth of the country. Our fight has made a valuable contribution to the working class. The end of the miners' strike is not the end of working class resistance to the Tories but the end of the beginning of the resistance. The working class will build on the traditions we have created over the last year. The miners who have returned to work live to fight another day: the fight goes on. We are going to have to spend some time pulling back, rebuilding — but the basis is there, the skeleton's there and all we've got to do is put the meat back on it.

Ever since I started in the pits, I've been preached at, talked at and argued with about the '26 strike by people like my grandfather and others who went through it. We've lived with the '26 strike. In comparison to the fight that we've just had, 1972 and 1974 were mere skirmishes. It's inevitable that the 1984/5 miners' strike will be talked about for decades too — like 1926.

The basic lesson

The mistakes that were made, the lessons that must be learnt will be discussed and analysed over and over again. The basic underlying lesson, the message proclaimed to the Tories and the ruling class is that the working class has got the ability to organise and to fight and we will go on to make a very radical shift in the politics of this country.

Notts was the storm centre of the strike, where the decisive battles to unify the NUM and stop all coal production were fought and, tragically, lost. Right from the start, as soon as we went out on the picket lines, the police told us they were there to see to it that Notts would work normally — at all costs. I'm of the opinion that if it hadn't been for the formation of the Notts Rank

and File Strike Committee, the strike in Notts would have crumbled very quickly and we would have had the whole of the Notts coalfield churning out its full quota of coal.

The rank and file strike committee kept the police occupied and away from other areas; kept production down and raised the political debate and the political arguments. That was the valuable contribution that Notts striking miners made. Right from the start, of course, we knew that even with a 100% victory we, in Notts, were going to go back in a minority. Right from the start we dared not contemplate defeat and so we had to look on the positive side. Well, we didn't win the victory that we wanted, but we didn't get smashed and wiped out, either.

Inside the Notts coalfield, one of the problems was that information was not readily available. That was partly a physical thing.

Socialist Organiser made a valuable contribution. It printed information and facts, not only from Notts but from other coalfields. Throughout the strike Socialist Organiser gave its pages to miners and miners' wives to express their own views and opinions. It advocated policies for the strike and commented on events — but it didn't try to ram it down our throats.

Socialist Organiser

Socialist Organiser was responsible for many of the contacts that we made with Yorks miners, Kent miners — who were absolutely amazed early on in the strike when marching into Notts they found Notts miners on strike.

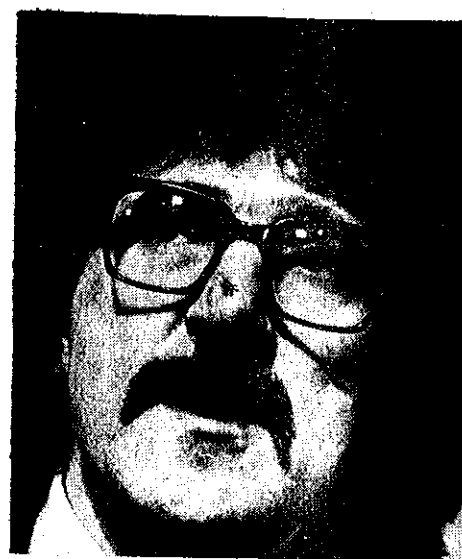
It brought in news about comrades having struggles in other parts of the world and understanding of their particular problems and the way they tackled them. It was a very valuable contribution.

But Socialist Organiser's contribution wasn't just information. It provided political analysis and raised questions in areas and about things that many people would not have thought of questioning. Many young people, many women, and many older miners as well who had never even contemplated any sort of political argument had questions posed. The strike created a thirst for information, a thirst for knowledge and therefore a thirst for political answers. It was the same among the women's groups. They were able to get in contact with other women's groups and see what their particular problems were and come together.

The paper helped to raise questions about the Labour Party and helped striking miners to understand what to do about it.

Despite our strong criticism of the Labour Party leaders we did not turn away from it and run to some other quarter, leaving the Kinnocks and Hattersley's in undisputed control of the working class political party.

Many miners turned into the Labour Party to raise the arguments and highlight the issues. And I think it's a very interesting thing that happened, that people in the



mining communities didn't turn their backs on the Labour Party although it could be argued that they would be entirely justified in doing so. Instead they turned into the Labour Party and said: we're going to alter it.

How far did the politicisation of striking miners and their families go? Are those lessons going to be held onto after the strike? Mining communities were highly politicised by the strike. We held some very big Socialist Organiser meetings at Ollerton. But there's no doubt that a lot of things will begin to fade after the dispute. It's like planting a handful of grain. Not all of them are going to take, not all the ideas, the contacts or the women's groups are going to stay. But many will and all the issues that were raised and argued about will continue to be argued about. If just a fraction of those politicised in the strike stay in the political fight so that next time round we'll be better prepared on the industrial front to take on the Tories, then that will mean we've made great progress, and we'll be delighted.

Miners must look closely at their experiences in the strike and learn the lesson that we've just paid so dearly for. We have faced the vile capitalist media and the whole apparatus of the state — the police, the employer and the government, united to beat the miners and grind the NUM into the ground. Don't let that lesson be wasted. Just because we're back at work and the strike is at an end doesn't mean an end to the fight. You have to continue to battle on. Nothing is going to be achieved overnight. It's going to be a long, hard and sometimes bloody battle, but that battle has got to go on. The dispute is still there about jobs and about communities, and you cannot afford to relax for one moment.

Transform labour movement

After the '72 and '74 strikes, many mine-workers sat back and thought, we've got it cracked and we don't have to fight any more. They were very much mistaken.

Mineworkers should not repeat the error: stay in the fight — settle accounts with the Labour leaders and the backstabbing TUC. Help us transform the labour movement so that next time round we have a labour movement — at both the political and trade union level — able to fight on our side as seriously and determinedly as the media, the employers and the police fought on Thatcher's side during the miners' strike.

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Magnificent miners

This was the greatest strike in British working class history. Its scope and duration were unique. It aroused and involved thousands of the women of the mining communities. It made a central challenge to Thatcherism and, implicitly, to capitalism itself. For the demand and rallying cry of the strike, "no 'economic' pit closures" was a demand for a system of society radically different to what we've got now. It implied a social system and an economy whose main-spring is not profit but need. It implied socialism.

The miners didn't win that demand, but their strike has educated tens of thousands of militants — and not only miners and their families — to know and hate capitalism and those who run it.

Of course the defeat of the miners is bound to depress the labour movement. It will not demoralise it. Precisely what effect the defeat of the miners will have on the labour movement is not something mechanically determined and inevitable. It is still being determined — and *we can still affect it*.

This was a defeat. But it was a defeat after a magnificent battle, the memory of which will inspire and instruct other workers. And workers in other unions have seen what a difference it makes to a union to have a militant fighting leadership. Should the miners have fought in the unfavourable conditions created by mass unemployment? MacGregor and Thatcher gave them no acceptable alternative. There are far worse things than to fight and lose as the miners did. The passivity with which, after 1979, the labour movement accepted blow after blow from the Tories without fighting back — that is the sort of defeat that demoralises, enervates and destroys.

The business of the miners' strike is far from finished. There are 700 miners still sacked and about 150 still in jail. We must fight to reinstate and release these brothers. Listen to Arthur Scargill:

"Those men who have been arrested and jailed as far as I'm concerned are political prisoners. They've been jailed because they fought for this union and we should all stand up and say straight forward what we mean. Those of our young people and those in the women's support groups who were arrested in the most brutal way have been criminal-

ised by a state that has deployed every possible tactic against the miners' union as they have sought to defend their system against the demand of a union and a movement that sought only the right to work. It is a stain that the next Labour government has got to wipe clean. It is a stain that they have got to take on board. And I appeal to all our Parliamentarians and to all those in the trade union movement. When this union talks about amnesty, for God's sake stop the equivocation, we want an amnesty for all our members who've been sacked during the course of this dispute. They have a right to their jobs back."

We must build a powerful campaign for the reinstatement of the sacked miners and the release of the class war prisoners taken by the Tories during the miners' strike. Such a campaign can also help rally the labour movement and counter and offset the depressing effects of the defeat on the labour movement.

There is great scope for such a campaign. There was a notable swing of public sympathy to the miners towards the end. Thatcher figured a victory over the miners would bring her the sort of political boost she got from the Falklands war. It hasn't. Many who had not previously sympathised with the miners came to resent and detest Thatcher's bloody-mindedness and vindictiveness.

An opinion poll showed that most people think that sacked miners should be restored to their jobs.

A campaign for reinstatement of the sacked and release of the jailed miners could develop into a powerful offensive to pillory the Tories for their treatment of the miners. It would be the continuation of the battle of the last year by other means and on other ground. The building of such a campaign is now the number one task facing the labour movement.

The miners' strike was a rich experience of open class struggle such as has not been seen in Britain for a very long time. The labour movement needs to study the events of the miners' strike and discuss and draw out the lessons for the future. It is as a contribution to this essential work that we publish this special double issue of Socialist Organiser.



Miners out in force on 'Democracy Day', March 6 1985. Photo. Stefano Cagnoni, IFL.